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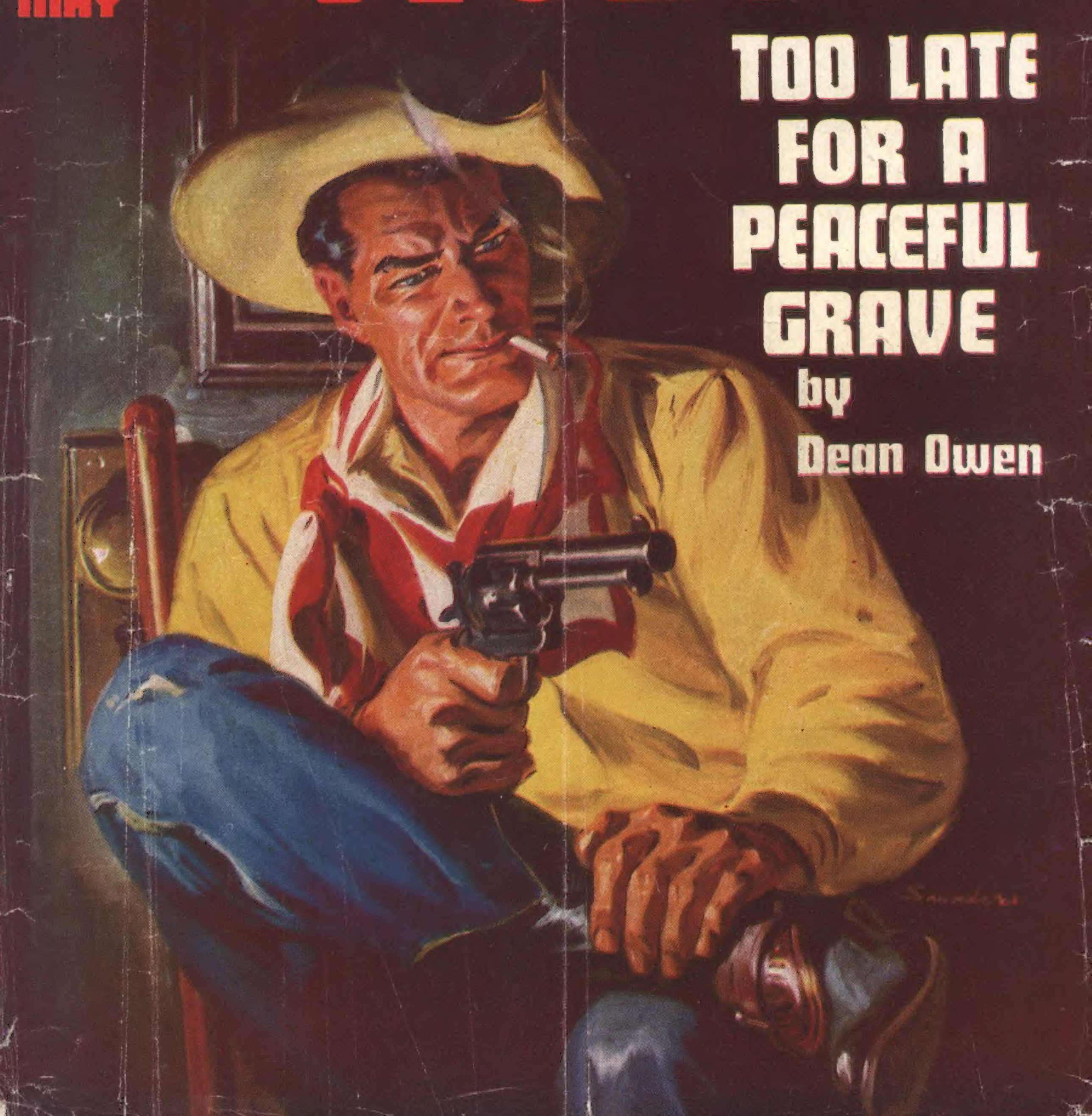

TOO LATE FOR A PEACEFUL GRAVE

by Dean Owen

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WESTERN ACES

GUN JOB AT DEADMAN'S SPRING
(Novelette) . . . . WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER 2
To blot out that brand of Cain, the Kid has to fight a bullet battle to the death.

RIDE THE RED STAGECOACH! . MATT FOSTER 19
The stage passengers turn out to be a cargo of gun-hung coyotes.

TRAIL OF THE TALKING TREES . MONTY CRAVEN 29
All about the courageous men who set up telephone poles in the West.

HARDROCK BASIN VULTURE . SPENCER FROST 33
Peaceful palaver doesn't work in treeing this human varmint.

COME AN' GET IT! (Poem) . MARTIN PRESCOTT 42

TOO LATE FOR A PEACEFUL GRAVE . DEAN OWEN 43
His way of meting out a badman's punishment flings the sheriff himself into the gallows' shadows.

SILVER HANDLES MAKE BOOT HILL BAIT
(Novelette) . . . . . NORMAN A. DANIELS 52
These vultures use .45 fodder to prey on their victims.

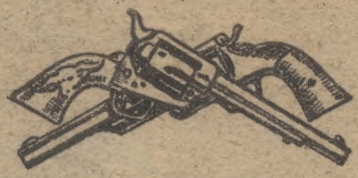
HELL-BENT FOR ELECTION . C. WM. CHAMBERLAIN 66
How two hombres took a brief flurry into politics in old-time California.

MANHUNT AT TIMBERLINE . JOSEPH COMMINGS 69
Chad Sawyer, on the prowl for bear, falls into a trigger trap himself.

THE WAY OF A GUNHAWK . . . AL STORM 78
That cold trail gets warmer when Santeen finds a hot-lead hideout.

PIONEER SAWBONES . . . . NAT MCKELVEY 89
Incidents in the stormy career of an intrepid Western medico.

Cover by Norman Saunders



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Gun Job at Deadman's Spring

Gripping Novelette

All his life the Kid had been kicked around from one end of the range to the other. And now, after a year with a hard-eyed owlhooter, he was through with trigger trails. But to blot out that brand of Cain, he had to fight a bullet battle to the death.

By Wayne D. Overholser

CHAPTER I

THE Dolores Kid knew that the day was not far ahead when he would have to quit Johnny Ringo. The sooner the day came the better, because Ringo was headed for a hangman's rope as sure as the Lord put thorns on a cactus. But knowing what he had to do and actually doing it were two different things.

Habit is a strong tie with all men, and it was so with the Kid. He had ridden with Ringo for a year; he had got used to taking Ringo's orders, to doing the work around camp and running the risks when they were out of grub. Still, tension had grown between them.

They came up from New Mexico in late spring, traveling north, apparently with no definite object in mind, but in a year of being with a man for most of the twenty-four hours out of every day, you get to know what he's thinking. Little mannerisms, a thoughtful scowl, a sudden reticence when there had been none. So by the time they had crossed the San Juan range and made camp at Deadman's Spring on the mesa south of Storm River, the Kid knew they were headed into something. And it wasn't good, or Ringo would have told him about it.

The spring was in a clearing just below a clump of aspens. Water, shade, fuel, and good grass for so

early in the year. All they needed for a few days of lazy comfort. They'd lain around in worse places for no better reason than the fact that they didn't have anything to do.

But this was different. Again the feeling was based on intangibles. The way Ringo snapped at him for no reason at all, his aimless pacing around the fire, his long studies of Storm Canyon that lay below them to the north, a twisting black notch beyond the rolling piñon- and cedar-covered slopes.

Finally, when he could stand it no longer, the Kid asked, "What the hell's biting you, Johnny?"

Ringo wheeled on him. "Nothing. What makes you think something's biting me?"

The Kid grinned. It wasn't always smart to grin at Ringo, but he couldn't help it. Ringo always struck him as being comical when he got huffy. He was a little man, not much over five feet tall, and he might weigh one hundred and twenty after a big meal. His face was thin with a great curled beak of a nose. Although he hadn't shaved for the year the Kid had known him, his beard was only a thin brown covering on his chin and the lower part of his cheeks.

When Ringo got mad, he threw out his chest, scowled, and tried to shove his receding chin forward, but for all of his grunting and grimacing, Johnny Ringo could not make himself look formidable. But he was, and no one knew it better than the Dolores Kid.

The Kid didn't grin long. He reached into a vest pocket for the makings, wiping his face clear of expression. "Just the way you keep moving around. You're working yourself up to something, and I've got a hunch it ain't good. If you're counting me in, I want to know what the play is."

RINGO scratched his nose, eyes again turned toward Storm Canyon. He said, "Yeah, I guess maybe you ought to know. Trouble is, I ain't sure myself. We're holing up here for a day or so, and they'll get word to us."

"A killing?" the Kid demanded.

"Yeah, a killing," Ringo muttered.

The Kid kicked a chunk of pine into the fire. "No killings for me, Johnny," he said in a flat tone. "I told you that."

"This one's safe enough. We get paid beforehand. When the job's finished, we'll head for Utah." He jerked a thumb toward the La Sal range. "Ain't far. Once we're across the state line, we ain't got a thing to worry about."

"Not me," the Kid said in that same flat tone. "I told you."

Ringo didn't like to be crossed. He was a killer, as mean and vicious as they came, and the Kid had seen some bad ones. He hadn't known how tough Ringo was when they'd thrown in together a year ago. The Kid hadn't particularly liked the gunman even then, but a man gets tired of riding alone. There comes a time when even a wolf like Johnny Ringo is better than nobody.

For a moment the Kid thought this was it. Ringo stood stratching his nose, his scowl deepening. The Kid watched fury rise in him and he eased his right hand toward gun butt. He wasn't as fast as Johnny Ringo. He had no illusions on that matter. He had seen Ringo pull his gun too many times. Still, he'd make his try, for he was that kind of man, and he had always gone on the basis that he had a chance in any ruckus as long as he could stay alive.

But Ringo didn't reach. He said in a metal-thin tone, "You'll play along, Kid. I set the price at a thousand dollars. We haven't had that kind of money since we throwed in together. You could use half, couldn't you?"

"Not for a killing I couldn't." The Kid ran a finger around his neck. "I seen a man hang once. Didn't look like a good way to die, Johnny."

It was hell to ride with a man who could explode as easily as a hair-trigger gun. The Kid had seen Ringo kill men for mighty little reason. He'd

watched Ringo pull his gun and shoot a dog or a sheep along the trail because he liked to kill. The Kid took a long ragged breath, watching Ringo's little ugly face, and his thoughts were bitter with self-mockery. He should have quit Ringo months before.

"No, it ain't a good way to die, Kid," Ringo said at last, his tone held even, "but I never seen a good way to die. We'll get it, sooner or later. A bullet if it ain't a rope. So I figger we'd better take what we can get when we can get it. A thousand dollars will buy us a lot of fun." He made a quick embracing motion with his left hand. "I may need you for this job."

Kind of funny, the Kid thought. He wasn't much good, either. Didn't even know who his own parents were. Kicked around from one place to another from the time he'd been picked up along the Dolores River twenty years ago, his folks killed by the Utes. What the hell! Maybe Ringo was right. A man could buy a lot of fun for a thousand dollars.

THE Kid lighted his cigarette and dropped to the ground on the other side of the fire from Ringo. He said, "All right, Johnny," and watched the tension go out of Ringo.

"Sometimes I think you're gonna get a conscience," Ringo said contemptuously. "It never pays, Kid. You'll find that out when you live a little longer. You help somebody out and they'll turn around and kick you in the teeth. Only one way to live. Take all you can when you can."

"I know damned well I don't want a rope around my neck," the Kid said.

"The smart ones never get a rope, and we're smart." Ringo looked northward again toward Storm Canyon. "We'll hear tonight. Better get supper started."

The Kid obeyed, a dull resentment smoldering in him. He'd had enough of Johnny Ringo's orders. He built up the fire from limbs he found around a deadfall pine, filled the coffeepot, sliced bacon, and opened a can of beans, the resentment deepening.

In fact, he had all he wanted of everything that had come his way lately. The trouble was he'd never had much luck doing honest work. Jobs were hard to get. If he did hook on with some outfit, he was the first to go when they began cutting down. When anything went wrong, he got the blame. It seemed to him that every honest man he'd met up with had tried to make an outlaw out of him.

Neither the Kid nor Ringo spoke while they ate. Dusk flowed in across the lower ridges to the north. Then sunlight faded from the clearing on the mesa and purple shadows washed in around them, and turmoil deepened in the Kid's mind. He knew, although he could not have told how he knew, that this was where the trail parted. If he went ahead with Johnny Ringo on this job and killed a man, he'd be outside the law the rest of his life.

The Kid took out his knife and began to whittle, ignoring the little killer on the other side of the fire. A gun, a saddle, and a good horse. That was the size of the Dolores Kid's fortune, plus about two dollars in silver in his pocket.

But the thing that really hurt was the grim knowledge that nowhere on this earth was there a place he could call home, nowhere a person he could call friend. Not even this dried-up gunman who had been his saddle pard for a year. Johnny Ringo would shoot him in the back as soon as he would the next man if it paid him to do it.

Now, as so many times during the years, he wished he knew who his folks were, whether he had any relatives, what his name was. But he would never know his parentage any more than a stray pup would know his, and bitterness grew in him.

Whenever he rode into a town, he found himself envying the people he saw: old men who could sit in the shade, middle-aged men with property and homes and families, the young ones who had girls to spark, to

take to dances, to kiss when they got them home, the kids playing "Run, Sheep, Run," their voices riding the twilight, their panting breaths and excited yells, their reluctance to come in when their mothers stood in open doorways and called.

ENVYING someone else for his possessions did nothing for the Dolores Kid but add to the bitterness. He was neither an outlaw riding the back trails and accepted by the Wild Bunch, nor was he an honest man who had made a place for himself among other honest men.

He didn't even have pleasant memories to cherish. His oldest memory was that night on the Dolores River, of flame and the roar of guns and the smell of blood while he lay in the willows along the edge of the water, too scared to breathe.

The Kid snapped his knife shut and rose. He said sharply, "What're we waiting here for?"

"Sit down," Ringo said testily. "Somebody'll be along. I told you we were getting the dinero first."

"How'd you get onto it?"

"In Farmington. I got to drinking with a fellow from this country and he told me they wanted a job done. Wouldn't say who. Just told me to be at this spring by tonight."

"You know more'n you're telling," the Kid said angrily.

"Damn little. It's somebody that's got a roadhouse on the river. They won't sell out."

"Why don't this outfit do its own killing?"

"Safer to hire outsiders."

"I don't like it," the Kid said.

Ringo said nothing. The Kid hunkered down and began to whittle again. He was back where he had started from. The forks of the trail were still ahead, and neither looked inviting. But he saw one thing clearly. If he took the wrong fork, there would be no turning back.

Johnny Ringo heard it first. He said, "Somebody's coming. I'll do the talking."

Then the Kid heard it. A horse in the aspens upslope from their camp. He still didn't like it. It could be a trap. Maybe they'd done their own killing and they wanted some rope bait handy. The years of riding around things, of ducking and watching and suspecting everybody had developed a caution in the Kid that was close to the instinct for self-preservation that a wilderness animal must have to survive.

He backed away from the fire, noiselessly, and pocketed his knife. He stood listening while the horse came close. Then he drew his gun, sounds forming a pattern. In this way he was sharper than Ringo, a sharpness that had more than once saved their lives.

"Where's your pard, Ringo?" a man called from the aspens.

"Around," Ringo answered. "If you want to talk, come on out of there."

"I like it here. You still want the job?"

It was a strange voice. The Kid had never heard anything like it, a sort of sibilant whisper that carried to where he stood. He wondered if it was all the voice the man had, or whether he was disguising it.

RINGO seemed a little bothered. He rolled a smoke, head bent as if thinking something over. He said, "Yeah, we want it, but I don't like the idea of you hiding out there in the aspens. I want to see a man when I'm talking to him."

The fellow laughed, a sound as soft as his voice. "You don't need to see me, friend. Here's your dinero." A small bag hit the ground at Ringo's feet. "You're better off if you don't know who's paying you. Then you can't tell nobody else who I am. Likewise you can't do no blackmailing in case you get the notion."

"Who is it?"

"The Starrs. Two of 'em. They've got a barn and roadhouse where the road to the mines crosses the river.

Only place for miles where anybody can ford it and the only place where wagons can get out of the canyon. We want 'em killed and their buildings burned. It's an easy chore because they're the kind of damned fools who don't know enough to be afraid."

"How far?"

"Half a day's ride if you take it slow. Better get in tomorrow evening and act like you're staying overnight. Then when it's dark earn your dinero and vamose. Get out of the state and stay out. If you get into a jam, nobody's helping you out of it."

"What do you want these folks beefed for?" the Kid called.

"None of your damned business. You do what you're paid for, which same ain't to ask questions."

"Shut up, Kid." Ringo weighed the bag in his hand. "How much in here?"

"Five hundred."

"That ain't enough. I told your man in Farmington we got paid beforehand."

"I know, but that wasn't my deal. I'm paying half now. The other half when the job's done. I'll mail it to you anywhere you say."

"No deal," Ringo said flatly. "I ain't telling nobody where I'm gonna be."

"All right. No deal. Toss that sack back."

Ringo hesitated, still holding it. He said, "I wonder if the Starrs would pay to know a party wanted 'em off the river bad enough to hire 'em killed?"

There was a moment of silence while the Kid worked around the fire toward the aspens. He caught the man's squat figure, the vague bulk of his horse behind him. He said, "Don't get the notion it'd be safe to knock Ringo off."

"All right." The man tossed a second bag at Ringo's feet. "There's the full thousand, but get one thing straight, Ringo. If you slope out of the country without doing the job you're paid for, I'll see that somebody catches up with you."

"We'll earn it," Ringo said, picking up the bag.

The stranger moved back to his horse and a moment later he was thundering upslope. It was not until the sound of his passage had died that the Kid moved out of the aspens. He said, "Know what that huckleberry would have done if I hadn't been out of sight?"

"Yeah, he'd have plugged me," Ringo said coolly. He tossed one of the sacks to the Kid. "Five hundred dollars. You'd be a long time earning that nursing a bunch of cows."

The Kid said, "I reckon," feeling of the coins through the canvas. But money wasn't everything. Gratitude was worth something, and Johnny Ringo had not thought of thanking him for saving his life.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS late afternoon with the sun already hidden by the canyon rim when the Kid and Johnny Ringo rode into the Starr place. The road they had followed was a long twisted ribbon laid against the side of the cliff, and the road that led on to the north rim was the same. Wide enough for a freight wagon. No more. As they splashed across the shallow stream, the Kid was thinking he was glad he wasn't a freighter. It would take a good man to put an outfit across Storm Canyon.

The house was a two-story log structure, plain and well-built, and questions that had been plaguing the Kid since the night before rose again in his mind. Why would anyone want this outfit burned? There was a log barn downstream from the house, some outbuildings, and several corrals. A good-sized hay field was on the south side of the river.

Everything about the place indicated strength and permanence, the sort of place a man would build when he had found the location where he

expected to live his life out. There was something else the Kid sensed about this place, something he found hard to put into words. Perhaps it was comfort. Or solidness. Or maybe satisfaction. Suddenly the Kid found himself wanting to see what these Starr men looked like.

A middle-aged man came out of the barn, calling in a courteous tone, "You looking for a place to stay the night?"

"Yeah," Ringo said curtly.

"Then you found it." Ringo's harsh tone had not taken the easy smile off the man's lips. "Light. I'll take care of your horses. Supper'll be ready afore long."

Ringo swung down. "I'll take care of my own horse, friend."

The man shrugged. "Your privilege." He nodded toward a horse trough hewn from a pine log. "Water. You'll find hay in the barn."

"Oats," Ringo said in that same curt tone.

"I'll get some for you," the man said amiably, and turned into the barn.

Ringo grinned at the Kid. "Easy just like that hombre said. We'll have our supper, wait till it's dark, and let 'em have it. Then we'll high-tail for Utah."

"Not me," the Kid muttered. "This gent looks like he's on the square."

Ringo scowled. "What the hell difference does it make? Somebody wants him out of the way. Don't cut no ice whether he's on the square or not. He just made the mistake of getting into somebody's way."

"I ain't in on the deal," the Kid said stubbornly.

"You've got the money," Ringo said pointedly.

"It ain't no crime to steal from that whispering gent," the Kid flung back.

The man came out of the barn. Ringo asked, "You're Starr?"

"Yeah. Ralph Starr. You looking for me?"

"Naw. Just wanted to be sure we'd hit the Starr place. They told me down the trail that you set the best table between Dolores and Ouray."

Pleased, Starr said, "We do our best, stranger. We've been here five years and we've had the notion that our trade was all the advertising we needed."

RINGO and the Kid led their horses into the barn and stripped gear from them. Ringo said, "Looks like a good business."

"It is. I could use some help, but in a mining country men don't see no sense in working at a river crossing like this." He nodded at the manger. "Enough oats?"

"You didn't give—" Ringo began.

"Plenty," the Kid said.

Ringo gave him a probing look. "When I pay for a layover, I like to know I'm getting what I pay for."

"You've got it," the Kid said.

Ringo didn't like it. Again the knowledge was in the Kid that the moment for breaking was close. He should have ridden off the minute he knew what they were heading into, but it was too late now.

"I never short a man on feed," Ralph Starr said. "I don't raise no grain here, and it's kind of expensive freighting everything except hay and our meat in from Montrose. But if you think your horse needs more oats, we'll fill him till he busts."

"He's had plenty," the Kid said.

The light was thin here in the barn, but it was good enough to see that Ringo's eyes had narrowed, that his mouth was pulled into a thin ugly line. It wouldn't take much more to set him off. The Kid was thinking that this was as good a time as any. He liked Ralph Starr. He was big and easygoing, and as the man had said the night before, the kind of fool who didn't know enough to be afraid.

Suddenly the Kid knew why he had come along. He hated Johnny Ringo, hated what he believed in, hated what he stood for. He thought of the year he'd spent with him, waiting on him, taking his orders, running the risks

when their grub got low. And why? Because he had no home, no job. He was a saddle bum, so lonely he had put up with Johnny Ringo's orneriness. So the tension built, and the Kid waited, hoping Ringo would make it a fight.

"Hell, what's the matter with you?" Starr said uneasily. "No sense getting into a row over my oats."

Funny, the Kid was thinking. He couldn't just ride off and leave it to Ringo. If he did, Ralph Starr would die like a pig in a pen before Johnny Ringo's gun, and his ghost would ride with the Dolores Kid. So he would kill Ringo or be killed. Funny, all right, so funny that the Devil was laughing in hell right now at the idea of the Kid throwing his life away for a man he had never seen until a few minutes before. But he had no choice. He had never turned his back on a fight in his life. He wouldn't turn his back on this one.

But it didn't happen then. Ringo said, "Let it go, Starr," and swung out of the barn.

Ralph Starr didn't move for a moment, dark eyes pinned on the Kid's face. A good man, this Ralph Starr, the kind of man the Kid had always wanted to be, but he hadn't met up with many like him. It was a violent land filled with violent men where law, more often than not, was a flimsy fiction to be bent the way the strongest and the toughest wanted it bent.

THEN, for the first time in his turbulent life, the Kid knew what he wanted. Ralph Starr needed help. Before he rode on, the Kid would ask for a job. But there was Johnny Ringo to be taken care of first.

"If you two have got trouble, would you settle it after you ride on tomorrow?" Starr asked. "Just me and Cherry here. I wouldn't like for her to see a killing, or even hear the guns."

"Cherry?" A sinking feeling hit the Kid's stomach. The man had said the night before there were two Starrs to be killed.

"Yeah, Cherry's my girl. She does the cooking and tends to the beds. I keep saying we'll sell out and move to Denver, but she likes it here and I never seem to find anyone that wants to give a fair price for the outfit. So we hang on, but I'm worried a little. Hank Cottrell's been riding us purty hard."

Ringo slipped back into the barn. "Somebody's coming, Starr."

"Thanks," Starr said, and stepped past the Kid and into the yard.

Ringo said softly, "You've been right proddy lately, Kid. A man don't have to work hard to get trouble with me, you know."

"Yeah, I know," the Kid said. "I guess we'll have it, Johnny. We ain't earning that thousand dollars."

"You think we ain't, do you?" Ringo asked in a rasping voice. "Hand over your money belt and saddle up. I'll earn it."

"No. You ain't earning it, neither. The other Starr is a girl."

"The hell!"

"Yeah. His girl. Called her Cherry."

Ringo shrugged. "Don't make me no never mind now. They won't find no bodies. Just some ashes." Ringo turned toward the door. "Wonder who these huckleberries are?"

Ringo stood with his back to the Kid. That was kind of funny, too. If the Kid wanted to live, he'd better not show his back to Johnny Ringo, but Ringo wasn't afraid to give his back to the Kid. It wasn't a matter of courage or bravado. Ringo knew what the Kid could do, and shooting a man in the back wasn't in him.

More than once Ringo had taunted him about it. "You'll give a man a chance someday and he'll plug you. No sense in that. When I can drill a man I'm after, I'll drill him regardless of the way he's standing."

The Kid stepped up beside Ringo. Three riders were crossing the river, silver spray splashing out on both

sides of them. The man in front was short and thick of body, a mocking grin touching the corners of a thick-lipped mouth.

Pulling up, he asked, "Still here, Ralph?"

The Kid's nerves tightened. The man had spoken in a sibilant whisper like the voice they had heard from the aspens the night before. Ringo said, "It's him all right."

"Starr mentioned a fellow named Hank Cottrell," the Kid said in a low tone. "Said Cottrell had been riding him pretty hard."

Ringo nodded. "That's probably the hairpin."

"Let's give the dinero back to him. Tell Starr what happened."

"Oh, hell," Ringo breathed. "Kid, sometimes I wonder why they ever pulled you out of the willows that time."

COTTRELL lifted his eyes to the barn and saw Ringo and the Kid in the doorway. He said something that the Kid didn't catch, nodded, and reined back to the river, the others lining out behind him.

"Just seeing if we're here." Ringo turned to the Kid. "That the way you read it?"

"Sure. Cottrell aims to get his money back."

Ringo scratched his nose, eyes suddenly thoughtful. "Naw, you're spooked. He's just wondering if we rode off with his dinero, which 'pears to be what you aim to do."

"It's what you'd do if you're smart. Cottrell's hands will be around to plug us the minute we fire the place. They'll leave our carcasses for the sheriff to find so he'll figger Starr got us afore he cashed in."

"You're spooked," Ringo said again.

Starr turned to the barn and motioned to the house. "Supper's ready." He waited until they came up to him. Then he nodded at the Kid. "That was Cottrell, the gent I mentioned. Owns Circle C, biggest outfit in these parts, but he ain't satisfied. Wants my place for a song."

"Don't look right for a cowman to want this kind of place," the Kid said.

Starr nodded gloomily. "I've wondered 'bout that. I've got it figgered out that he don't aim to run the roadhouse. I've got the only crossing for miles on either side of me, and a man like Cottrell can always get rid of stolen beef."

"There'd be a big market in the San Juan camps," the Kid said.

"That's right," Starr agreed, "but it's just a hunch. No proof. Anyhow, Cottrell has a way of keeping in good with the county officials." They had swung around the house to the back. Starr pointed to a wash pan, a bucket of water, and a clean towel. "Wash up, boys."

When Starr had gone on inside, the Kid said, "Looks like he's calling it right. You're a damned fool to do Cottrell's dirty work for him."

Ringo grunted, sloshed water into the pan, and washed. The Kid watched him, a plan shaping up in his mind. Cottrell's intentions would not change Johnny Ringo's even if he believed what the Kid said. He'd go ahead with the killings he had contracted to do, regardless of what Cottrell planned or did. Ringo had that kind of a cold-blooded sense of outlaw honor. A bullet was the only thing that would stop him.

The Kid hung his hat on a nail, washed, and finding a piece of comb wedged in between the logs, ran it through his hair.

Ringo said with quiet malice, "Don't get your hopes up, sonny. She'll be as ugly as a mud fence."

"Hope not," the Kid said.

Starr came out of the kitchen, washed, and combed his hair. "It's ready," he said. "Come on in."

THEY followed him inside. The girl was standing beside the stove, dark brown hair whitened by a streak of flour on one side of her head. She smiled, her lips generous and

touched by the good humor which lighted her face. She was in her early twenties, the Kid guessed, a leggy, trim-figured girl who was nothing like the floozies he had known, or the washed-out ranchers' wives he had met on the places where he had worked. He took a long breath, eyes pinned on the girl, and his past reached up and hit him and he was sick.

"I didn't get your names," Starr was saying, "but this is my daughter Cherry."

"Johnny Ringo," Ringo said.

"My friends call me the Dolores Kid."

Cherry nodded at them, saying, "I'm glad to know you." Her gaze brushed Ringo's whiskery face and settled on the Kid's. He lowered his eyes, wishing he had a shave and a haircut, and he wondered what she was thinking of him. Anybody could read Johnny Ringo's face just as easily as a crawling thing could be recognized. Was she seeing him as the same kind of human varmint?

Cherry turned to the stove and opened the oven. She said, "Sit down. I'll have these biscuits on the table in a minute."

The Kid pulled a chair away from the table and sat with his back to the wall. Ringo took the end place and immediately reached for the platter of steak. He ate with smacking chomps, head lowered, but the Kid waited until Cherry poured the coffee and sat down.

"What did Cottrell want?" the girl asked.

"I ain't sure," Starr said worriedly. "First he wanted to know if we was still here, and I said we'd stay till we got a fair price. Then he looked around and said he'd lost some cattle. I said we didn't have no strays around and he rode off."

Cherry passed the biscuits to the Kid and again her eyes were on him. She said directly, "We've been threatened by Hank Cottrell. It's fight or run."

"We ain't had no trouble yet," Starr said. "These men don't want to know our troubles."

"Maybe they do." Cherry's eyes questioned the Kid. "You mining men?"

The Kid reached for the steak, wondering what she was getting at. He said, "No. We're just riding through."

"Looking for a job?"

"Just riding."

"But you could use a job, couldn't you?"

"Doing what?"

"Fighting Hank Cottrell. Or is that gun you're packing just an ornament?"

Johnny Ringo laughed. "Ornament, ain't it, Kid?"

Yeah, it was funny, the Kid thought. Damned funny. Suddenly he was tight and cold all over. He shivered, thinking of his past, of all the tough wasted years when he had been broke and often wondering how he'd eat the next day. Then he thought, *This might be the way.* He said, "I'll take that job."

CHAPTER III

JOHNNY RINGO stopped laughing. He had a biscuit raised to his mouth. Now his right hand was motionless, the biscuit suspended within an inch of his parted lips.

"I ain't sure about—" Starr began.

"I am," Cherry cut in. "We won't run and I won't marry Hank Cottrell. The only thing left is to hire gunmen who'll fight back."

A gunman! That was the total of what she saw in the Kid. His right hand had dropped to his lap. "Keep your hands in sight, Johnny."

Starr rose and kicked back his chair, trembling with fear or rage. The Kid couldn't tell which.

"This is crazy, Cherry," Starr said hoarsely. "These men have been working up to a killing ever since they rode in. I don't think either one is any good. Let them have their night's

lodging and ride on. We'll do the best we can with Cottrell."

Ringo slid the biscuit into his mouth, chewed on it, and said thickly, "I kept hoping you'd get smart, Kid. I didn't want to kill you yet."

"You'll wait till my back's turned," the Kid said contemptuously.

Cherry said, "I don't know what's the matter, but if it has anything to do with working for us—"

"It's a little more than that," the Kid said. "Starr, get some rope. We'll tie Ringo up so he'll stay out of trouble."

Ringo said, "I don't think I would, Starr."

Ringo had gone on eating as if this was no concern of his. More than once within the last twenty-four hours the Kid had prodded him, but the little killer had let it ride. He was a shrewd, tricky man who never made a gamble unless the odds favored him. So he had waited, and now he kept on waiting, hoping for an opportunity that would let him take the Kid with little danger to himself. The Kid understood that, and grew tense with the waiting.

Still Starr hesitated, worried and uncertain. Cherry said, "Go on, Dad. If the Kid's going to work for us, we'll have to trust him."

"You can't trust a man you never saw till an hour ago," Starr cried.

Ringo grinned. "Plumb loco, ain't it, Starr? Well, I'll tell you that you'll never pay the Kid enough to keep him straight. He'll shoot you in the back when somebody offers him more'n you're paying him."

A chill raveled down the Kid's spine. He had made his choice and there could be no changing it now. He wanted Ralph Starr and his girl to trust him, wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life, but on the very face of things, Starr was right and Cherry was wrong. There was no way he could prove to them what his real intentions were.

"You fellows saddle up," Starr said hoarsely. "We won't charge you for the grub or horse feed. Just go on and leave us alone."

"Not me." Ringo reached for another piece of steak. "This is the best meal I've had for a spell, and my horse needs rest. I'm hanging around and I'll pay you when the time comes. As for my pard's talk, just forget it."

THE Kid had not taken his eyes from Ringo. Ringo would be thinking he had nothing to worry about from Starr or the girl. Shooting them would be like knocking pigeons off a barn roof, but somehow he had to get the drop on the Kid. So the Kid watched, tension building in him. He knew the girl was staring at him, expecting him to do something; he felt the pressure of her father's hostility. He had taken the job the girl offered regardless of Ralph Starr's feeling, and he'd earn his first pay by shooting Johnny Ringo.

It came, but not as the Kid expected. Ringo picked up his knife. Somehow it slipped, fell out of his hand and clattered to the floor. Ringo said, "Hell," and stooped sideways to get it. It was a good act, as tricky as a dozen others the Kid had seen Ringo pull off in the last year, so good that he didn't catch what Ringo was up to until it was almost too late. Ringo, hidden by the table, had reached for his gun instead of the knife.

The little killer straightened and came out of his chair in a lightning burst of speed, gun flashing from holster. Starr yelled something and Cherry screamed, but the Kid didn't move. He had caught the play just as Ringo leaped out of his chair. Ringo had always depended upon speed, and he was fast enough to get in one shot that ripped through the Kid's coat above his left shoulder. Then the Kid, firing under the table, caught Ringo in the leg and knocked him off his feet.

Ringo cried out and rolled and fired again. The Kid was up now, kicking his chair away from the table. He drove a bullet into the yelling frantic

gunman. Then Johnny Ringo's head hit the floor and his mouth sagged open and he was dead.

The Kid holstered his gun and moved around the table. He picked up Ringo's gun, slid it into his waistband, and stooping, lifted the limp body. "You'll have company before long, Starr. Where'll I put this carcass so it'll be out of the way?"

Starr tried to say something, but no sound came from his paralyzed throat. It was Cherry who nodded at the door across the room. "In there." The Kid carried Ringo's body to the door. He pushed it open, saw that it was a storeroom, and dropped the dead man in the corner. He picked up some canvas and laid it carelessly across Ringo so that it covered him and looked as if it had been dropped there with no particular purpose in mind.

When the Kid went back into the kitchen and closed the door, Starr faced him with a cocked shotgun held on the ready. "I told you not to have your ruckus here. Now get out."

The Kid ignored him. There was a pool of blood on the floor. He said, "Get me a rag, ma'am, and I'll wipe this up."

Cherry brought him a cloth, and he cleaned the blood up as well as he could so that it was nothing more than another stain on the dark floor.

Starr said, "I told you to get out."

Outside a man called, "Hello the house."

The Kid jerked a thumb toward the door. "Your company, Starr. Better go see what he wants, and stay out of the light." He stepped around the table, picked up Ringo's plate and cup, and carried them into the pantry. When he came out, Starr was gone.

NOW, for the first time, he saw that fear had hit Cherry. She asked in a high-pitched voice that was close to breaking, "What is it all about?"

"Somebody made a deal with Ringo to kill you and your dad for a thousand dollars," the Kid answered. "Cottrell, I reckon."

"It would have to be," she said.

"But you said he wanted to marry you. If that's true, he wouldn't want you killed."

"You don't know who it was?"

The Kid shook his head. "Ringo knew this kind of a job wasn't for me, but he thought he could make me go along." The Kid reloaded his gun, knowing it sounded unbelievable when he told it, for he couldn't put into words his loneliness, his need for some kind of company, even that of Johnny Ringo. Nor could he make her see that he wasn't Ringo's kind, that the year he had ridden with Ringo had not put the brand of Cain upon him.

"But you were his friend," she said accusingly, "and you killed him."

"Friend." He slid his gun into leather, raising his eyes to hers. "Friend," he said again, savoring the full meaning of the word. "Ma'am, Johnny Ringo wasn't nobody's friend. I rode with him because there wasn't anyone else, and all the time I knew that if the cards came up right, he'd shoot me in the back." He shook his head. "No, he wasn't a friend. Not to nobody."

There was talk outside, the sound of steps on the packed earth. She gripped his arm. "You suppose that's Cottrell?"

"I don't know. Just don't let on about Ringo."

She nodded, and turning back to the stove, dropped wood into the firebox. She was putting the lid back into place when Starr came in with a stranger. He was tall, taller even than the Kid. About thirty-five, dark-complexioned, with black piercing eyes that swept the room and came to rest on the Kid. Thin lips spread into a grin that failed to reach his eyes.

"Howdy, Kid," the dark man said. "Haven't run into you for quite a spell."

"No," the Kid said, searching his

mind for the place where he had seen the man.

"This is my daughter, Cherry," Starr said. "Sam Yaffee."

Yaffee nodded, said, "I've heard of you, Miss Starr. Your beauty and your reputation as a cook has reached for miles on both sides of your river. I know I'm late, but I'd like supper."

"Of course. Sit down, Mr. Yaffee."

But Yaffee remained standing, black eyes coming again to the Kid. "I heard you'd thrown in with Johnny Ringo, Kid. Where is he?"

"Gone."

Yaffee shrugged and lifted a cigar from his pocket. "A bad actor. He would never have done you any good."

Starr remained by the door, shotgun still in his hand, his face mirroring his uneasiness. He was watching the Kid, distrusting him, yet still uncertain.

YAFFEE bit off the end of the cigar and looked around the kitchen. "A fine place, Mr. Starr. Your services are certainly needed. It's a long ride to come over the mountain from Montrose if you're going to the mines, and I guess a man wouldn't be going anywhere else if he was coming through here."

"Yes," Starr said, "except for transients who drift through."

"Like the Kid here." Yaffee fired his cigar, the cold smile on his lips again. "Always a few of those, of course, and that's what makes your job hazardous. You never know what they'll do. Some of them will murder you for a few dollars."

"Meaning me, Yaffee?" the Kid asked.

Yaffee blew out a long plume of smoke. "Of course not. I was thinking of—Johnny Ringo, for instance. The danger is that Ringo may have contaminated the man he rode with."

The Kid's hand was close to gun butt. "You'd better lay your cards face up, Yaffee. Where did you see me before?"

"Why, I don't remember. I travel a good deal. I knew Johnny Ringo pretty well. Talk is bound to get started, you know. A man can't ride with Ringo without getting some of the same smell on him."

"Let's have it, Yaffee," the Kid said. "You're trying to say something."

"Don't touch your gun," Starr called. "You won't kill another man in my house tonight."

Yaffee's black brows lifted. "So the Kid killed someone tonight, did he?"

"Ringo," Starr said. "I've run this place for five years, and he's the first man who's been killed here."

"You fool," the Kid breathed. "You crazy fool. When I got Johnny Ringo, I saved your life, but you won't believe it."

Yaffee chuckled. "The Kid's trying, Mr. Starr, but it don't go down. He's probably heard you've got some money hidden, and he wants it. He killed Ringo to cut him out of his share—"

The Kid hit him, slamming him against the wall beside the stove. Cursing, he grabbed for his gun and immediately changed his mind, for he was looking into the black muzzle of the Kid's .45. In that moment the Kid had forgotten Ralph Starr, a mistake that was nearly fatal, for Starr had thrown the shotgun to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The blast was like a cannon shot in the room, the buckshot splattering into the wall over the table.

The Kid swung toward Starr, not understanding. Cherry said, "I'm sorry, Dad."

Starr was feeling of the side of his face, a piece of stove wood at his feet. Then the Kid saw what had happened. If Cherry had not thrown the chunk of wood in time, the Kid would have had his head blown off. Then he thought of what Johnny Ringo used to say, "You help somebody out and they'll turn around and kick you in the teeth."

"All right, Starr," the Kid said, tight-lipped. "You string along with

Yaffee and see where it gets you." He swung to Cherry. "I'm drifting. You'd better come along. You ain't safe here."

Starr shouted, "No. He's just a cheap killer."

But Cherry was staring at her father, a sudden defiance in her eyes. "You can't see the difference between him and Ringo, can you, Dad? And you wouldn't blieve that Cottrell rode in to see that Ringo was here, ready to kill us?"

"You don't know that, either," he flung at her. "Who told you—the Kid?"

She nodded. "He's right. It isn't safe for me here, so I'm going with him."

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS black dark outside with a thick overcast hiding the stars and a new moon. There was no sound but the whisper of the river and the thundering racket of a horse kicking in the barn.

The Kid stood with his back to the wall, the girl beside him. She had shut the back door, slamming it against her father's indignant oaths. She breathed, "You knew I wouldn't really go with you, but I've got to trust somebody."

"And there ain't nobody else around." He was silent a moment, eyes probing the darkness, ears keening the wind, but he caught no glimpse of shadowy figures, no sound except the river and the horses in the barn. Then he said, "Funny, ma'am. 'Bout me and Johnny Ringo. He wasn't any good and he didn't want to be. I reckon I ain't, either, but I'd like to be. That was the difference between us."

She stood close to him; he felt the soft pressure of her body, sensed that she was looking up, "You aren't like Ringo. I knew that the instant you came into the kitchen."

He understood. In desperation, she had sized them up and had offered him a gunman's job because she saw something in him her father did not. To her he had been the better of two bad choices. She wouldn't regret it. He promised himself that. This was the chance he had been waiting for.

"I can't figger Yaffee out," the Kid said thoughtfully. "You ever see him before?"

"No."

"He must be hooked up with Cottrell."

She gripped his arm. "Why are you waiting here? Why don't you go after Cottrell?"

"You think getting my hide ventilated will help you or your dad?"

"No, but waiting here—"

"I'm trying to figger it out. There's got to be an answer. Cottrell's got a big outfit, but he wants you folks off this river crossing. You said he wanted to marry you. Now maybe that was just one way of getting you off the river. It didn't work, so he hired Ringo. If they've got a big rustling deal on, it would be worth a thousand dollars to get you and your dad taken care of, but I don't reckon he really aimed to lose that thousand."

She shook his arm. "Saddle up and go after Cottrell. I hired you to fight, and you stand here—"

"Look," he said testily. "If I'm figgering this right, I won't have to saddle up to find Cottrell. It's my guess Yaffee—" It struck him, then, where he had seen Yaffee. In Greenriver a year or two ago. Yaffee was a gambler, but he'd been more than that. The talk was that he wanted to see some of the rustlers who were holed up in Robbers' Roost. There was a good chance he had been working on this scheme then. "Did a bunch of new men come in to work for Cottrell 'bout a year ago?"

"Yes. Six. They drove a herd in from Utah. Why?"

"I'm guessing that herd was stolen in Utah, and it's taken Cottrell this long to get rid of it in the mining camps. Now he wants more cheap beef, and you folks are sitting in the

only place where he can fetch 'em in from the Uncompahgre Valley."

"What's Yaffee doing in the house? Maybe Cottrell sent him in to kill Dad. I'm not going to pay you fighting wages . . ."

"I know something about how this game's played, ma'am. I've got a hunch that Cottrell and maybe a couple of his boys are out there waiting. I wouldn't get the saddle on my horse till they rubbed me out."

"Then why did you leave the house?" she demanded.

"To give me a chance to think. It ain't a bad idea to give Cottrell and Yaffee some time to worry, neither. They must have been outside when they heard the shooting. Trouble was me and Ringo didn't fire the house and come out like they figgered we would. Cottrell knew you'd never seen Yaffee, so he sent him to find out what had happened. Of course Yaffee had to tell some big yarn so you wouldn't get onto him."

"Then why don't they finish it up?"

"They're waiting on each other." The Kid laughed softly. "Yaffee don't want to rub your dad out till he hears a gun that would tell him they'd got me. I reckon it's time to invite Cottrell in. Any way we can get into the house without them seeing us?"

"Through the front. There's no light except in the kitchen."

TAKING his hand, she led him around the house to the front porch. He said, "Keep down. Don't make no racket."

They crawled across the porch to the door. Cherry turned the knob and pushed the door open. "There's a table in the middle of the room. That's the only thing you might stumble into."

He saw the rectangle of light around the door on the far side of the room, heard the blur of talk between Yaffee and Starr. He whispered, "Stay out of the way. I may have to kill Yaffee."

She said, "Be careful," and stepped away from him.

He felt his way across the room, touched the table and circled it. A moment later he pulled his gun and shoved the door open. He said, "Reach, Yaffee."

Yaffee was at the table finishing his meal. Starr stood at the stove. Slowly Yaffee turned his head, color washing out of his face. Starr reached for his shotgun and dropped his hand when the Kid said, "Starr, I'm trying to save your hide, but if you touch that scattergun, I'll put a window in your skull as sure as you ain't got a brain as big as a pea."

Starr breathed, "Where's Cherry?"

"She's all right. Get on your feet, Yaffee. If you make a try for your iron, you'll get it."

Yaffee raised his hands and rose, his cool self-control leaving him. "What do you intend to do, Kid?" he asked in a ragged begging tone.

"Kill you, maybe. Cherry, come here and take his gun."

She came into the room, throwing a questioning glance at her father. He raised a hand toward her, his face troubled. He said, "I—I—thought you'd gone."

"I wasn't doing any good here," she said. "I thought I could get the Kid to go after Cottrell, but he's got another notion."

She took Yaffee's gun and stepped back. "Tell Dad about it, Kid."

"I don't know why I should tell him anything," the Kid said in a sudden rush of bitterness. "He tried to blow my head off a while ago."

"Why shouldn't I?" Starr demanded. "I watched you kill Ringo. How did I know I wouldn't be next? Or Cherry?"

"You would have been next," Yaffee cut in. "Don't trust—"

"You open your mug again until I tell you to," the Kid said coldly, "and I'll give you a lead pill to swallow. Now lower your hands. Then get over to the door and yell for Cottrell to come in."

The Kid squeezed off a shot, the slug ripping into the wall a foot off

Yaffee's head. "Starr," the Kid said, "you'll get a chance to use that scattergun again, and you'd better try it on the right gent."

White-faced, Yaffee obeyed. He threw the door open, lamplight falling past him into the yard, and yelled, "Hank. Come on in."

"All right, Yaffee, back up," the Kid ordered.

Yaffee backed away from the door and crossed in front of Starr. The Kid said, "Kind of funny, me in a deal like this."

"I was thinking the same," Yaffee taunted.

COTTRELL came in then, two of his riders behind him. He stopped, staring around the room, his big-jowled face showing the impact of his surprise.

"I was just saying, Cottrell," the Kid said, "that it was kind of funny, me being in a deal like this. I never got plumb over on the owlhoot side like you hombres have, but I didn't get much show at being honest, either. That was where you made your mistake, Cottrell. You knew I was riding with Ringo, so you figgered I was just like him. Like Yaffee said a while ago, you figgered he contaminated me."

Cottrell threw a quick glance back at Cherry, then brought his eyes to the Kid. "What the hell you talking about?"

"I'm talking about me and Johnny Ringo. You bought him, but you didn't me, and he wasn't very smart. He figgered he could keep on running me like he had for a year. That was his mistake, but you made a bigger mistake in not doing your own killing. You had a big thing, didn't you, Cottrell? If you'd been smart, you'd have paid Starr what he wanted, but you're the slick kind that wanted to save some dinero by buying a murder. Then you'd bushwhack the men you hired and you'd take back your dinero. You'd leave our bodies—"

Cottrell's wide dark face was purple with suppressed fear and rage. He broke in, "I'll leave your bodies, too, as sure as hell's hot. What are you figgering on?"

"On taking you to the county seat and letting the sheriff see what a varmint looks like who'd hire his killings done and then rob the killers. They don't come no lower'n you, Cottrell. Not unless you get down with the crawling things, and I reckon that's where you belong."

Any man could stand only so much and Cottrell had reached that place. He whispered, "Shut up," and plunging sideways so that one rider was between him and the Kid, drew his gun. It was the way the Kid wanted it, for he knew he could never take the four of them to the county seat and get a conviction.

Yaffee clawed for a derringer in his pocket as Cottrell and the men with him grabbed their guns. Crouching a little, .45 in his right hand, the Dolores Kid went into action. He took the man in front of Hank Cottrell with a bullet between his eyes. He drove a second slug into Cottrell's chest. Then something happened. It was like a club smashing him back against the wall. He tried to stay upright, to prong back the hammer of his gun. Two of them were still on their feet.

Then he was falling. He had tackled too big a job. Two of them, Yaffee and another man in the doorway. He was on his belly, gun still clutched in his right hand. It seemed a long way off, this beat of gunfire. There was a blast of a shotgun, more Colt fire. Vaguely he realized that Yaffee was out of the fight. He crawled toward the door, trying to see.

More shooting. It must be Cherry. She had Yaffee's six-gun. He rubbed blood out of his eyes, caught a faint glimpse of a man on his knees in the doorway, .45 in his hand. Cottrell! The Kid fired, rocking back under the force of the gun buck. Then he fell forward and kept on falling into the

blackness, and the last of consciousness fled from him.

WHEN the Kid came to, he was between sheets and he was in a bed, two things that were unknown to him. It was daylight. His head was aching steadily in great throbbing bursts of pain. He put his hand to his head and felt gingerly of the bandages.

"Take it easy," Ralph Starr said. "You got a hell of a bad wound. You must be made of rawhide, or you'd be dead. Skull so tough it shed that slug like a drop of water on a duck's back."

The Kid would have laughed if he hadn't felt so bad. He guessed he had a skull just about that thick. He turned and looked at Starr who was rocking to and fro, the squeak of his chair steady and nerve-racking.

"I guess we got 'em," the Kid said.

"Yeah, we got 'em." Starr ran a hand across his face. "I put some buckshot into Yaffee and Cherry shot one of Cottrell's men. It's something we won't forget for a while, either one of us, but it had to be done. Cherry says it's better to kill a man than to lose everything we've got, and I reckon that's right." He licked dry lips. "You see, Kid, I always believed a man could get along under any conditions without killing, but I guess I was wrong. Leastwise about Hank Cottrell."

"It's finished now," the Kid said.

Starr nodded somberly. "It's finished, and Cherry and me had a talk. We ain't selling to nobody. We're staying right here." He licked his lips again. "You see, you've been doing some talking. About your folks and getting kicked around and never having no home. Talked more than you would have if you hadn't been out of your head, I reckon."

He rose and walked to the window. "I ain't gonna explain why I done what I done. I just didn't want no trouble and after you killed Ringo—well, I didn't figger I could trust you. Anyhow, Cherry saw something in you that I didn't, and I reckon she's right. We'd like to have you stay and make your home here."

The Kid closed his eyes. This was it, the sort of chance he'd seen only in his dreams, a chance he had earned by taking chips in a fight that was not really a fight at all. He said, "I'd like that, Ralph."

He heard Cherry's steps cross the room and opened his eyes to see her set a tray on the bureau. She said, "Good morning, Kid. Say, don't you have any other name at all?"

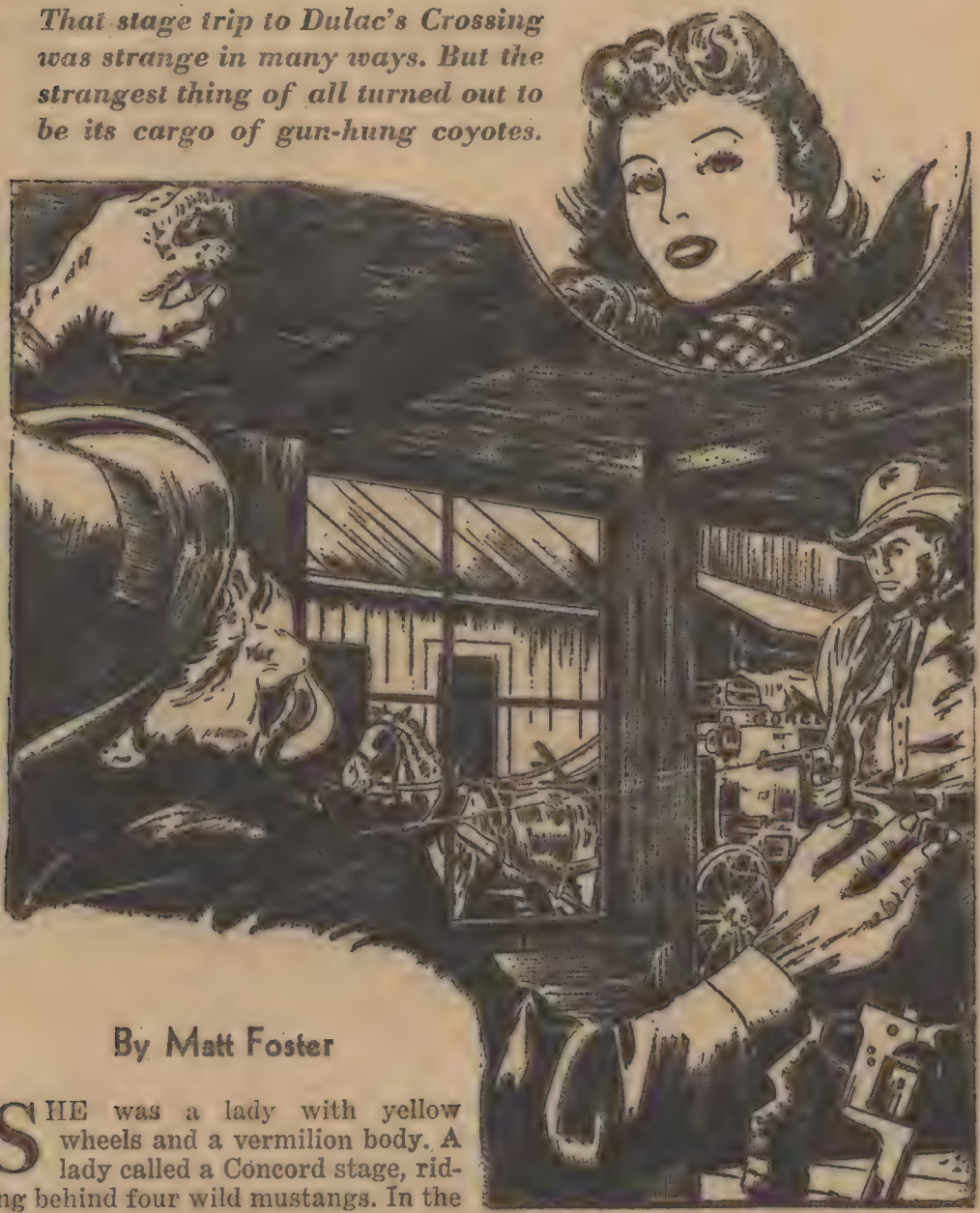
He didn't, but he was thinking that there would come a day when he would earn the right to ask her to marry him, and it would be a hell of a note to make her call herself Mrs. Dolores Kid. He said, for no better reason than it was the first name he thought of, "John Smith."

She laughed. "You know, Mr. Smith, I've heard of you. Somewhere."

He closed his eyes again, thinking that the gunfire of the night before had killed the Dolores Kid along with the others. John Smith was another kind of man. The drifting was behind him, the aimless riding with men like Johnny Ringo, the discontent and the uncertainty that had nagged him because he did not know his name. John Smith was good enough. His roots would sink deep here beside Storm River.

Ride the Red Stagecoach!

That stage trip to Dulac's Crossing was strange in many ways. But the strangest thing of all turned out to be its cargo of gun-hung coyotes.



By Matt Foster

SHE was a lady with yellow wheels and a vermilion body. A lady called a Concord stage, riding behind four wild mustangs. In the slanting rays of the afternoon sun she was a gaudy specimen.

The road was straight enough beside the Little Wichita River, but the ground was dry and the wheels and hoofs kicked up a cloud of dust that seemed to be following the stage.

Alone on the box sat Jess Kane. They said about Jess that he never used a whip on a horse. He talked to them through the reins and they understood. At any rate, they had their necks arched out and they were trav-

eling along at a ten mile an hour clip.

Kane was an hour late now. It had been partly his fault, but the two men who had joined the other pair of travelers had been slower than cold syrup. The four of them were raising particular hell below. Twice, empty whisky bottles had been flung out and the voices of the men indicated that the whisky hadn't been merely spilled on the floor.

Jess Kane growled under his breath, gave a slight tug on the reins and those mustangs kicked up a thicker cloud of dust. Kane was slim, all muscle that rippled down his shoulders. Holding four horses and a stage developed sinews like ropes.

He had a rifle in a scabbard beside him, though he didn't expect to use it. He wore a single six-gun, butt out and the holster swinging free. There were road agents, but they hadn't bothered Jess Kane in a year and a half. Five of them, buried along the trail between Bidwell and Dutch Han's place, were eloquent evidence that Jess Kane didn't like to be held up.

He hadn't gotten off scot-free. Once he'd barely made it to Auburn. When the stage pulled in, he hadn't been able to check the horses. They'd stopped of their own accord, just behind the inn. Kane had tumbled to the ground that time, but the box of currency was under his arm when he fell. Sometimes the chunk of lead which he still carried around close to his spine bothered him.

Suddenly there was a terrific pounding and strident yells. Kane pulled up. One of the quartet had his head stuck out of the window.

"Turn around," he commanded. "I dropped my six-gun 'bout a mile back there."

Kane sighed. He didn't like these men anyway. "Reckon if it's found, it'll be turned in at the next station. Me—I got a schedule to make. I ain't turnin' around for no six-gun, not even one made of solid gold. I'm plenty late now."

The man cursed him fluently and Kane drowned out the tirade by starting the horses, waiting until they strained at the harness, and then he released the brake. The stage jerked forward and he grinned as he pictured the confusion of arms and legs as four men hit the floor.

They began singing loudly two miles farther on. Kane didn't mind. Man was entitled to pleasure, even if it came in a bottle. He wasn't above taking a drink himself.

JESS KANE rode into Rand's Station where four fresh horses were waiting. Old Jake, who always hitched them up, seemed mighty slow this evening. Kane fretted about that and fumed some too, but Jake just moved so fast and no faster. Moreover, Kane didn't like the look of the horses. They were too fat and probably windblown.

"You got better horses than that, Jake," he argued. "I'm tryin' for speed. Late now."

"Then you'll be later." Jake carefully turned his head and spat in the dust. "These here are the best I got."

Kane shrugged. He climbed onto the box and lifted the coach horn. He blew two loud blasts on it. The sounds of hilarity inside the way-station store and saloon didn't die away. Kane put down the reins, climbed off the coach, and walked toward the store. He was sore all through now and Kane wasn't fit company for a rattlesnake when he felt that way. He pushed the door open and stood there, his slim form carelessly slack.

"If you gents are comin', you got one minute to get aboard. I'm travelin'."

One of the men, whom Kane knew as Hank Haden, swaggered up to him. Hank was big, brawny and while he wore city clothes, there was nothing citified about the pair of six-gun belts crisscrossed about his middle. He was dark, black-eyed, and smelling of whisky. Some of it had spilled down the front of his vest.

"We paid our fares, didn't we?" he demanded.

"Sure. I ain't arguin'—"

"You work for the stage company and that makes you our servant. You'll wait 'til we're ready to pick up our boots an' ride with you."

Kane raised his eyebrows. "I'll be waitin', sir."

Haden grinned and started to turn away.

Kane said, "For one minute I'll be waitin'. Then you jaspers can use shank's mare for all of me."

He turned away angrily. The gun roared and the bullet chopped a good-sized piece of wood from the door-frame. Kane came to a stop. He pivoted very slowly. His face was as serene as if he were shot at ten times a day. Hank Haden was grinning, his three companions laughing out loud.

"Put up that gun," Kane said quietly.

Haden threw back his head and roared. He slid the gun into its holster. "I guess that'll teach you to do like payin' passengers say."

"Now you can pull it again," Kane said. "And make it fast or I'll sure'n blazes plug you where you stand."

Haden's laugh died away. His eyes glittered evilly. But he seemed to be very sure of himself. Slowly his right hand dropped to his side, fingers hooked. Slowly his feet moved until he was well braced for the draw. Then he emitted a wild yell and went for leather.

Kane threw his gun underhanded and was pulling trigger while Hagen's six-gun was still pointed at the floor. Kane pulled twice. The first slug smashed through Haden's arm, crushing the bone. The second one hit him high in the shoulder.

He screamed, dropped the gun, and clapped his left hand to the shoulder wound. Blood ran down his arm, over his hand and fingers, and dripped onto the floor. Kane didn't see this. His gun covered the other three men.

"When I'm drivin' a coach," he said calmly, "I'm like a captain on a ship at sea. My passengers do like I say. Now—get into that coach. That, or try what Haden did."

"Not me," one of the men grunted. "I ain't never seen the likes of that draw. Danged gun never even came level far as I could see. Jess, I ain't arguin' with that kind of gunwork."

THE trio filed out and headed for the coach. Kane sheathed his gun, walked over to Haden and pushed him against the small bar. He used a knife to slit the sleeve of the coat and bare the wounds, then examined them.

"Man's loco to draw against a stranger, Haden. You never know if he's better'n you. Now hold still while I waste some of this good whisky and clean up the holes."

Haden said nothing then. He submitted to the treatment and to the bandaging. He knew his arm was broken, but he gave no thanks for the splints Kane applied. Kane walked away from him. Haden followed. As they passed through the door, Haden spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Kane, I'm killin' you for that. It'll be in my own good time, but no man ever did that to me and lived. You ain't to be the first."

Kane didn't even turn his head. "Reckon it'll take you a long time to learn how to draw with your left, Haden. Maybe I'll be an old man and ready to die. Now get aboard and stop talkin' crazy. Anybody'd think you was an outlaw, with a reputation to keep up."

Kane didn't see the flush that came over Haden's pale face. Kane swung aboard and picked up the reins. He didn't care any more. They could ride with him or not, as they chose. He didn't give a hoot. Then he frowned slightly as the coach lumbered on. Haden was fast with a gun. No doubt about that, and the way his companions got set showed they were no strangers to gunplay. Why did they go to all this nonsense over leaving when the stage was ready? It didn't add up. Passengers knew the stage

driver called the time. It had to be that way.

Another thing bothered him. Two of the men had come aboard three hours before he picked up the second pair. Apparently the twosomes were strangers to one another and yet—they were carousing and even willing to draw when one of their number was in trouble.

Kane gave it up. He wasn't worried. He carried no mail, no dust, not even any express packages. If they held him up, they'd get little. He settled back for the eleven mile run to Dulac's Creek and wondered how Jim Hollister was doing on the stage ahead. Jim had left word he was out to set a record. A passenger had bet him twenty dollars he couldn't make Bidwell by sundown. For twenty gold dollars, Jim Hollister would make Sacramento, Kane reflected with a grin.

His four fresh horses acted as if they'd been working on a jerkline, heaving ore carts up mountain grades. They didn't run, they ambled—until the road got sandy and then they walked. If Jess Kane could talk to horses with the reins, these four didn't know the language.

He blistered them with curses, used a whip for one of the few times in his career, and gave it all up. He began to comprehend that these cayuses were plain elderly. They were doing the best they could and a whip would likely make them drop dead.

Kane sat back, cursed the moon and the stars and cursed Jake, the hostler back at Rand's Station. Old Jake had never done this to him before. The men in the stage were quiet now. All the revelry had died with the shooting. At least he didn't have to listen to that. Kane wondered how in tarnation late he'd be. If he had to keep this team, it could amount to days.

The night was growing darker as he heaved into sight of Dulac's Crossing. Another mile and that span would have been pushing the stage backward. Kane never saw lights he welcomed more. Here he would get fast, strong mustangs. With luck he might end the trip before dawn.

The four passengers didn't get out this time. Kane paid no attention to them, but he did make very certain that no more aged horses were rigged into the traces and breast chains.

DULAC'S CROSSING was only a cabin for hostlers and a rare passenger from somewhere in the hills. The hostler working the team was the slowest Kane had ever seen. He reminded him that the stage was late.

The hostler said, "Me, I ain't got nothin' to do with that. An' I'm a-tellin' you, it'll be later. Heered Carey Bridge was washed out last flood an' she's been shakin' like a hangover all day."

Kane shrugged. He examined the horses and found one breast chain loose. It almost looked like a deliberate attempt to wreck or delay the team. He turned to the hostler.

"Never saw you here before. Where's Dulac?"

"Off huntin' a sassy mare that got outa the corral this afternoon. You want I should tell him somethin'?"

"Yeh," Kane growled. "Tell him to get hisself a new hostler."

Kane swung aboard, picked up the reins, and then peered into the darkness beyond the stage stand. A man in sombrero, chaps, and clinking spurs was running out toward him. He held a gun of some kind under his arm, and without hesitation he ran around the back of the stage and clambered aboard to sit beside Kane.

Kane closed his eyes in resignation. "Glad to have you, pardner. Mighty glad, but will you tell me why I got you ridin' shotgun on a coach that carries nothin' more than four drunk and wild passengers?"

"Shut up and drive," the guard muttered under the turned down brim of his hat.

"Me," Kane sighed. "I draw nothin' but folks with grudges. Reckon I'll

just have to pay somebody to smile at me."

"You jabber like an old coot. Drive!" the shotgun guard ordered.

Kane pulled lightly on the reins and smiled. He had a team this time. They were fresh, would soon be warmed up, and he'd cover the next ten miles in an hour and a half. It was mostly level road anyway, hard packed and without too many twists. Once he got across Carey Bridge . . .

"Dang the luck," Kane shouted.

"What's wrong with you now?" the guard asked in a low growl.

"Told me back at Dulac's the bridge was ready to go out. Jim Hollister, drivin' the stage ahead of me, was ridin' a bet and makin' time. If he had a big load and ran too fast, he likely rattled that old bridge so it'll fall when we ride up to it."

There was no comment from the guard. Kane wondered about him. It was unusual for a guard to come aboard at Dulac's in the first place and even more unusual for a guard to ride a no-cargo stage at all. Kane chewed that around in his mind for a while and tried to get a look at the guard. He couldn't see anything more than a dim form, hunched over, shotgun across his lap and one hand very close to the trigger guard.

Then he had other worries. The bridge was just ahead. It wasn't much of a stream, but no stage could leave the road here and ford it. If the bridge was out, he was stuck. Kane pulled up. He got down, looked into the stage itself and saw his four passengers apparently asleep. He walked to the bridge and out on it. The thing shook beneath his tread. Kane bent over the railing to examine the supports and crossbeams.

Someone called, "Kane! Kane!"

He whirled, hand dropping to his gun. The guard stood erect on top of the stage. Kane thought he saw a shadow drop back and the stage door close quietly. Kane walked back and looked inside again. One of the men had his eyes open and there was a silly grin on his beard-stubbled face.

"You don't seem to be in no blasted hurry now," he sneered.

KANE didn't reply. He swung aboard, gave the guard a sharp glance, and then braced himself. He spoke calmly. "Take aholt, pardner. This here bridge may buckle right under us, so stand ready to jump."

"Yes—yes sir. That's why I hollered. Thought I saw it caving in," the guard replied and Kane frowned darker than ever. But there was no time to investigate this shotgun guard now. He was far enough away from the bridge to get rolling well. The horses smashed their hoofs against the bridge and it began to rock. The stage wheels rumbled over it and it rocked more. There was a crazy creaking noise from the timbers.

Kane used the whip, snapping it hard and fast. The horses pulled mightily and they cleared the other approach as the stage began to settle. The bridge was on its way down.

"Hi—ye-e-e!" Kane yelled and snapped the whip. "Ye-e-e—you ornery critters. Pull faster!"

The stage gave a sickening lurch, somehow cleared the timbers and settled down on an even keel. Kane exhaled slowly, clucked at the slowed down horses, and settled back.

They reached foothills where the road was harder than ever and the wheels seemed hardly to touch the surface. Kane began singing. He always liked it when he was making time. In his four years of driving stage, he'd never felt the wind whip him harder. That span of horses was a prize.

"Faster," the guard growled. "Make them go faster!"

"We're flyin' now. What's eatin' into you?" Kane demanded. "What's—"

A terrific pounding came from below. Kane slowed the horses down, leaned overside, and wanted to know what was wrong.

One of the passengers said, "Do you have to drive that crazy? Ain't it enough you plugged Haden twice? Do you want to kill him? He's bleedin' to death from bein' banged around like dice in a cup."

"You can tell Haden he better pad that arm. I'm not slowin' down for him or anybody else. He asked for them bullet holes."

Kane clucked the horses into a faster gait. "First off," he grumbled, "I got me a shotgun guard who ain't satisfied we go as fast as a stage ever run. Then I got me passengers who want me to go slow. It's like—hey—there's somethin' awful peculiar about this."

The shotgun jabbed his side. "Faster. Make them go faster."

Kane wrapped the reins around his left hand and turned slightly in the seat. He said, "You can shoot if you like, but that won't get you any more speed. I'm takin' off your hat, pardner, and seein' what you look like."

"I'll—I'll sh-shoot!"

"You know, you don't sound like you will. And you forgot to keep your voice low." Kane swept the sombrero off the reddish hair tumbled down in a cascade to lie like silk against the guard's shoulders.

"A girl," Kane gasped. "Reckon next thing will happen to me this trip is have a buffalo come flying over the stage. And—my, my, a mighty pretty girl at that."

SHE was undeniably pretty. There wasn't much light, but Kane could see a perfectly chiseled face, the long silken hair, a shapely neck. She bent her head and sobbed.

Kane said, "Now, now, it's all right. But this is a funny way to be sneakin' a ride."

"I'm not sneaking a ride." She raised her head and her eyes flashed behind the tears. "It's just that I'm —I'm so—so damned mad—"

"You sure sound it. Somethin' I did, maybe?"

"Yes, you. Anyone would think you wanted to delay the stage and—and he'll be waiting at the next stand surer'n blazes. That's no elegant language I'm using, but I don't feel 'specially elegant just now."

Kane picked up his whip and cracked it. The team laid out and the coach began to travel. He said, "That ought to suit you some, ma'am. Mind tellin' me why you got to have all this speed and them jaspers ridin' below don't want no speed a-tall?"

"It's my grandfather," she said. "He was supposed to catch Jim Hollister's stage, but somebody bet Hollister so he'd make time and Grandpa missed the stage. It ran through more than an hour early."

"I been told about that bet," Kane said. "What made it so all-fired important for your grandpa to make Jim's stage?"

"He's carrying gold. A sack of it—all he has. Wild Tim Hinchcliff and his riders have been closing in. They're after that gold dust, but Grandpa kept it hidden and they knew he'd never tell where. But they scared him until he was ready to travel."

Kane nodded slowly. "I'm beginnin' to see. Jim Hollister's stage was carryin' mail and two guards. Hinchcliff'd be a fool to try and stop it."

"I've been hoping you'd be so close behind Hollister's stage that Grandpa would miss yours, too. Then he'd hide the gold again, quick."

Kane said, "And I'm carryin' four jaspers who aim to be on the stage when your grandpa gets aboard. They'll take him and his gold like nothin' at all. Maybe plug him and plug me in the bargain. I'm right grateful you caught up with me, ma'am."

"My name is McLaren. Rose McLaren. Now it's too late. They've delayed you. Grandpa will be waiting. If he won't get aboard, they'll shoot him down. If we give him a warning, they'll shoot us. What can we do?"

"You just get both hands on somethin' solid, Rose McLaren, and keep

'em there. We're goin' to ride past the stage stand where your grandpa is waitin' so fast he won't know we arrived. After that we'll think of how we can ditch them four owlhooters ridin' below us."

"Oh, thank you." She put a hand on his arm. "Thank you, Jess. I didn't dare trust anyone. They tied up two men back at the last stand, Dulac's Crossing. The hostler who gave you that team was one of their men."

"I was thinkin' he might have been. Four miles on, we hit the stage station. When I give the word, get braced. This here stage ain't even goin' to touch the ground."

She nodded, content now. The wind blew her hair straight back. Jess Kane thought he'd never seen a prettier sight. They swung into the straight road to the next station and soon they saw its lights. Kane half arose to urge the horses to more and more speed.

THEY were able to see people at the stand now. Some of them waved their arms. Kane kept the team running fast. Then he let out a yell, pulled the reins, and yanked the brake. The holster, unaware that Kane meant to go right through, had led four fresh horses squarely into the the middle of the road.

There was no turning off. The stage stand was on one side, a gully on the other. Kane had to stop. He sank back with a sigh that was more like a moan. Rose McLaren hastily jammed her hair under the sombrero and pulled the rim of the hat far down.

Kane got off stiffly, his hand near his gun. A bent man with a very heavy canvas sack was approaching the stage. Kane started moving toward him.

A voice from inside the stage said, "We'll blast him when he stops, Kane. And you, too. Let him come aboard. All we want is his gold."

Kane knew he didn't have a chance. Without a word, he climbed back on the box. The horses were changed in fast time. He had good ones again. From this point and beyond it, there was reason for neither speed nor delay.

Kane swished the whip. These were seasoned horses that practically knew the way and needed little attention. The stage lumbered off and Kane chewed at his under lip.

"What are we going to do, Jess?" Rose asked.

"I dunno yet. I'm chewin' it over. That was a fool stunt tryin' to run through the stage stand. I mighta knowed they'd make sure I'd have to stop. Now they got your grandpa down there and ain't much we can do to get rid of 'em."

"They—they'll kill him," Rose half sobbed. "He'll go for his gun the minute they try to get the gold dust. He worked half his lifetime to accumulate it and he'll die protecting it. I know him, Jess."

"And I know them jaspers. They're bad. I gunned one of 'em, but there's still three and I ain't that good I can chop 'em all down. Why didn't you tell me about this afore we crossed the bridge? I saw one of 'em climbin' up behind you."

"I was afraid. I didn't know but that you were one of them, too. Jess—do you know what will happen if they get the upper hand?"

"Reckon so. You keep that there shotgun ready. Blast the first one that starts anythin'."

"Ho—up there! Ho—Jess Kane!" one of them was shouting.

There was a single gunshot. Kane felt the girl stiffen. She was pressed close against him now. Kane pulled up the horses some.

"First one of you jiggers who makes a move gets full of lead," he hollered back. "I'm plenty wise to you."

"With Rose McLaren ridin' beside you, we don't wonder, Kane. Listen—stop this stage or we'll put one through the old man's head. I'm not askin' twice."

"Stop the team," Rose cried.

"Please stop it. Let them have the gold. It doesn't matter as long as Grandpa isn't killed."

"I'm thinkin' of you, too," Kane said slowly. "One of 'em must have got a better look at you than we figgered. I'm willin' to take a chance on my life and even gamble your grandpa's but not you, honey. Them owl-hooters ain't exactly gents."

ROSE shuddered and clung to him. From below, the same bandit yelled a further warning. Kane pulled the horses and set the brake. It was Haden, with his bandaged and stiff arm, who got out. He peered up through the darkness.

"Rose, climb down from there and get into the stage. We're ridin' a few miles further and we're cravin' your company."

Kane checked her with his arm. "Haden, you said you'd kill me back apiece. I'm invitin' you to try now."

Haden laughed. "If you draw on me, the old man gets killed. You'll get it and so will Rose."

"He's right," Kane whispered. "Are you willin' to risk goin' down there and depend on me to do somethin'?"

"I'll do anything you say, Jess. Anything at all."

Kane spoke to Haden. "You got the old man's dust. What else do you want?"

"The old man's got more gold and we want that to. This kind has long red hair. Kane, you're licked. I'm raising my good arm. When I drop it, the old man dies."

"No!" Rose cried out. "No, I'll come down. Don't kill him—please!"

She threw down the shotgun and hastily climbed off the box. The door on the other side of the stage opened and one man sprang out to seize her. At the same instant. Haden leaped into the stage from his side. Both doors slammed.

Kane pulled his gun, half arose, and then sat down again. What could he do? Getting down to fight it out would only mean his quick death. Then Rose and her grandpa would be completely helpless. Kane picked up the reins and started the horses. He cracked his whip, urging more and more speed out of them until the stage rocked dangerously.

His mind raced along with the spinning wheels. There had to be some way. It would only work if he could leave the stage and come at it from behind. To surprise them and gun down at least a pair of them before they could even draw.

But how? He did get an idea, but gave it up as impractical and foolhardy. You don't have people's lives by getting killed yourself, he thought. Then when he heard a scream from Rose McLaren, Kane didn't stop to try to figure out another way. There simply wasn't time.

He wound the reins around the iron crossbar at the back of the seat. He climbed down until he hung above the rolling flanks of the left rear horse. Kane gave himself a push, hurtled out, and landed across the back of the horse.

One thing in his favor. These were well-broken horses; they knew the road well, and from here on it was straight, wide, and hard packed. His scheme might work. If it didn't, they'd have to dig him a grave somewhere along this stage road. There wouldn't be enough left of him to bother bringing to town.

KANE didn't have time to get his wind. He waited until the startled horse calmed down some and resumed its cadence with the others. For a moment the stage was being jerked to the left some. The one thing Kane must avoid was arousing the curiosity of the men in the coach. If they looked out and saw what was going on, they'd pick him off neat.

Kane worked his way along the horse until he straddled her neck and hung on with his knees. So far this hadn't been too bad, but what he had to do now was the most dangerous part.

He leaned forward as far as he could and reached for the leather strap holding the breast chain in place. He couldn't make it. He tried again and missed. Then he raised his knees, freed his legs from their hold of the animal's neck, and gave a mighty lunge.

If he slipped, they wouldn't have to shoot him unless it was to put him out of his misery. A fall between the horses would result in his being trampled and then caught by the rolling wheels of the heavy stage.

Fingers slid beneath the leather. He hauled himself up fast. The lead horse was plunging wildly in surprise at his unexpected rider. Kane leaned forward and spoke to the animal. They were old friends. The horse stopped its plunging.

Kane had to get his wind back now. He waited a moment or two. Then he reached down and began to unbuckle the horse from the traces and the breast chain. He had only to release the last buckle now and the horse would be free. He whipped off his hat, slapped the horse on the flanks with it, then released the final buckle and gave the horse a hard pull to the left.

The beast veered, somehow got away from the other horses. They were slipping back. The stage would catch up with them and as it flashed past, those owlhooters would see Kane and know his trick.

He dug heels into the horse's ribs. Dug them hard. The startled animal threw her head high, reared, and then lit out. No pony could have done better. Kane twisted in the saddle, saw that the stage was still rolling fast, just as if four horses were pulling it instead of three.

He rode off the trail, streaked for the trees lining the road, and wheeled about only when they fully protected him. The stage shot past, rocking dangerously.

Kane pulled his hat down hard.

Riding bareback wasn't one of his best feats, but it had to be. He rubbed his nose, pulled the six-gun out of leather a couple of times. Then he wrapped his legs around the horse as hard as he could and kneed her into action.

At any moment the stage might leave the road. With only one lead horse, anything was likely to happen. If it did leave the road, the coach was bound to turn over. Maybe everybody in it would be killed. Kane had seen

stages after they'd rolled several times. What he'd found inside them wasn't pleasant to look upon.

He was leaning along the neck of the horse, like an Apache on a raid. He kept slapping her with his hand, talking into her ear. He was behind the stage now, swallowing its dust. If they heard him, they'd likely shoot him off that horse. But he depended on the noise of the steel-rimmed wheels, the rattle of the coach itself, and the pounding of the horses' hoofs.

HE RODE closer and closer, wishing he'd set the brake partly to slow that danged team. They were pulling the coach as nicely as if a crack driver was on the box.

Kane drew his six-gun and thumbed back the hammer. As he jerked the horse to the left and cut out to run alongside the coach, he saw Haden laughing with his head thrown back. Kane shot him through the neck. He rode closer, thrust the gun through the window of the coach, and saw Rose being held by one of the others. The third man went for his gun. It exploded almost in Kane's face. His six-gun roared, too. The third man doubled up.

The one holding Rose dragged her around for a shield and tried to draw. The fourth one was already in action. His bullet smashed high into Kane's shoulder, almost throwing him off the pitching horse. Kane fired again—he didn't miss.

Then the man holding Rose howled in pain. Her fine white teeth were buried in his arm. Her hands clawed at his face, seeking the eyes. He had no time to draw. Kane, biting his lips to keep back the pain, trained the gun on him.

"Let go of her," he commanded.

"Make her let go of me," the man yowled.

Rose opened her jaws, sprang away, and the man raised his hands fast. Kane ordered him to open the stage door. When this was done, Kane pulled away a little.

"You can jump and risk breakin' your neck or you can have a bullet through your heart. I ain't partic'lar one way or the other."

The man gave a yell and jumped. He landed headfirst, arms and legs flying out. He rolled over several times and then came to a stop, a huddled heap with a twisted neck.

"Put a gun on them jiggers who ain't dead," Kane yelled above the racket of the stage. "Rose—can you handle a six-gun?"

"I hope they give me a chance to prove I can," she yelled back. Kane rode ahead until he was able to seize the lead horse and gradually bring the stage to a stop. He slid off the horse, nearly fell, and then all the pain hit him at one time. He was staggering when he got up to the coach door.

Rose wasn't holding a gun. She had her face buried in her hands. Kane knew why. The old man was dead. They'd killed him with that single shot which also served to warn the stage driver. They'd worked a bluff and nearly got away with it. The three bandits were also beyond help.

Half an hour later Rose held the reins. Kane, his shoulder bandaged, sat beside her.

"Now I'm later than ever," he grumbled. "Never had such a ride."

Knowing he was talking to try to make her forget the tragedy, Rose smiled a little.

"As soon as all this is over, Jess—maybe I'll be waiting at Dulac's Crossing someday. Would you stop for me? Even if it meant you'd be a little late? I'll be wearing a dress, not a man's clothes."

"Send me word," Kane grunted. "That's the day I'll ride through every other stop. That's the day I'll be so late they'll figger the Injuns got me. That's the day—"

She moved a little closer to him, careful of his shoulder.

"Jess," she said softly, "just say—that's the day—and let it go at that."

Trail of the Talking Trees

By Monty Craven

True story of the courageous men who set up telegraph poles across the Great American Desert.

SOME warlike Gosiutes were motionless on a camelback of rocky land, watching the slow progress of a crew of white men below on the sandflat. But the only emotion in the black eyes of the red men was a childlike curiosity. They couldn't understand why the white men were setting up straight dead trees and stringing them together with long strands of wire.

The Indians, breech-clouted and sinewy, were mounted bareback on shaggy ponies. They nudged their moccasin heels into the ponies' bare flanks and picked their way down the wind-ribbed rocks to inspect the mystery at closer range.

One of the white crew, digging a deep narrow hole with a long-handled shovel, looked up from his work. "Injuns!" he hollered, giving an alarm.

A huge foreman with a brown spade-shaped beard peered toward the camelback. His broad face was, like the rest of the men, sun-scorched and sand-scoured from weeks on the Great American Desert. "Nothin' but Siwashes," he said with contempt. "They ain't on the warpath. Come on, boys. Give us a hand with this next pole. Set 'er up!"

The Gosiutes rode in slowly. They speeded up only once. That was when they passed under some of the strung-up wires that sang overhead

in the wind. Then they slapped their ponies ahead in superstitious haste.

The foreman went on with his work, keeping a wary eye cocked on the redskins. "Keep away from them poles!" he shouted at them.

But that was like telling a group of small boys to keep away from a stack of peppermint sticks. The Gosiutes wanted to inspect these mysterious telegraph poles. They lingered, edging closer all the time. They had dismounted and were snooping and sniffing into everything.

One of the braves bent over what looked like a long, thin, endless snake. It was one of the wires that the white men were stringing up. He reached out and grabbed it.

There was a wild cry as the brave was hurled backward into the air. He somersaulted on the ground, then crawled away trembling with shock and terror. He'd tried to pick up one of the live wires.

The other Indians steered clear of the deadly wires in the future. But some of them had spied a row of earthenware jugs lined up. These jugs looked just like the ones that the white men drank their firewater out of. If the Gosiutes could get just one of these jugs, this would turn into a picnic. They smacked their lips at the thought. One of their thieving brothers, using all his stalking skill, crept closer to the jugs, snatched one up, hid it under a blanket, and made his way undetected back to the horses.

The Gosiutes waved a friendly good-by to the white crew.

"There they go again," grunted the foreman.

THE Indians rode out of range, as far as the rocks. They got off their ponies and gathered around the earthenware jug. The brave who'd stolen it claimed the first drink. He uncorked it, while the others watched in silent anticipation, and set the neck of it reverently to his lips. He took one swallow. Then his heels shot from under him and he fell prostrate on his back.

The others looked on in frightened amazement. They weren't able to read the label on the jug, that said: *Nitric Acid for Batteries.*

The redskin on the ground was, fortunately for him, not dead. He finally stirred, opened his eyes, and gazed woozily at his brothers. "Ugh!" he grunted. "White man's firewater heap strong!"

And in the distance the white men, little realizing the impression they'd just made on the redskins, went on stringing up their precious telegraph lines.

These men on the Great American Desert were under the leadership of James Gamble, who was building the line in 1861 from Virginia City, Nevada, eastward to Salt Lake City, Utah. In a way, it was a race. Gamble was trying to beat another group of telegraph men who were working vigorously westward from Nebraska toward the Mormon stronghold.

At the moment, Gamble had charge of fifty men. He had twenty-six wagons, each drawn by several yoke of stout oxen. These wagons distributed the poles, wires, and other materials along the barren trail from Virginia City. All the men had special jobs. Some of them played off the line, driving stakes where the poles were to be set up. Others dug the holes with their long-handled shovels. Another group stretched the wires and strung them up. The remainder worked as cooks and camp attendants. Thus the tenuous line was spun out like a spider's gossamer at the rate of ten miles a day.

This was going to be the final link of communication between the East and the West. The famed Pony Express was now covering this wide dangerous gap between the bonanza mining camp in Nevada and the old muddy Missouri. The drumming hoofs of the ponies could reach the west coast in nine days. But progress de-

manded an even swifter delivery of important messages.

Hiram Sibley, president of the Western Union, had planned for years to build the long link needed to give the nation telegraphic service from coast to coast. When the North American Telegraph Association rejected his latest suggestions, Sibley said, "Very well, gentlemen, we'll do the work ourselves."

Sibley carried his proposals to Congress. Most of the lawmakers were fired with enthusiasm at the dramatic success of the daring, new "Pony Mail." Anything was possible out West! Shortly afterward, a bill was passed providing an appropriation to encourage the building of the line that Sibley had proposed. Not everybody in Washington had faith in the venture, but at last Sibley had the go signal.

At the very outbreak of the Civil War, two groups of hardy men were racing each other across the mountains and sands of the West, converging on Salt Lake City. There was going to be a substantial prize for the group that completed its line-stringing first.

GAMBLE, moving slowly eastward on the desert, faced obstacles. There wasn't any lumber in the sandy waste. Every stick of wood had to be wheeled in. Brigham Young, the leader of the Mormons, had signed a contract with the Pacific Telegraph Company to supply Gamble with the poles. The pioneer settlers of Utah were a people who had been discriminated against farther east. And they were a poor people. During the days of '49, while other men dug for gold, the Mormons dug for wheat and potatoes. This contract to supply the linesmen with poles was going to add some money to their scanty substance.

They were chopping down the yellow pine trunks in the rough mountains that hemmed in the Great Salt Lake, then hauling them great distances with ox teams. But the hard-worked cattle were getting thin and weak. The wheels were falling off the ill-used, bleached, warped wagons, the iron-shod rims lashed on with strips of rawhide to keep them from falling apart. The reward was too meager for the great efforts. Some of the Mormons gave up the struggle.

The pine poles were reduced to a

handful. Gamble's crews came to a standstill. In the face of this emergency, Gamble sent one of his lieutenants, James Street, hastily to confer with Brigham Young himself. After viewing the situation with a sober eye, Young said, "The Mormon people will never break a contract. We will deliver those telegraph poles even if it makes paupers out of us."

The poles once more came lumbering in rickety ox carts into the desert camps. Gamble redoubled his efforts to make up for lost time.

Gamble and his men were never entirely to themselves for any great lengths of time. There were streams of passers-by: freighters, overland stage passengers, the fast, flashing Pony Express riders, emigrants with slow-moving, creaking ox-hauled trains. They had Indians for company.

The Indians came to question the whites, not to battle them. Which made the way a little easier for Gamble. Gamble told them that the wires were a gift from the Great Spirit. They could carry a man's voice for miles. This story made a round of the tepees and finally a hawk-nosed, eagle-eyed chieftain thought he'd see how much truth there was in it.

The chieftain suddenly appeared at one of the way stations and looked gravely at the young operator. "How!" The chieftain raised his hand in greeting. "Me Chief Wijiji."

"How're you?" said the operator nervously, looking leery-eyed at the head full of feathers, then at the accompanying braves. At the moment his scalp felt very insecure on his skull. "What do you want?"

"Me hear about talking trees." Wijiji pointed to the telegraph poles. "Mebbe trees can't talk. Mebbe white man speak with forked tongue."

The operator felt a little relieved. At least he could prove that the wires worked. "It's no lie, Chief," he said. "Any message that I send—that is, the Great Spirit can carry any message to the one you want to talk to. I'll show you," he went on eagerly, hoping to gain the chieftain's friendship. "Come inside."

Wijiji stepped toward the door of the operator's hut and so did the other braves. The operator looked apprehensively at them. "Tell your friends to wait, Chief."

The braves were ordered back. Wijiji then sent a message westward along the line to a fellow chieftain to meet Wijiji at a certain point at a certain time.

"That's all there is to it, Chief," said the operator. "You go there and he'll be there."

Wijiji went to the appointed place and the other chieftain was waiting for him. They were astonished at this result of the white man's magic. They discussed it and were convinced that the Great Spirit's tongue was in the talking trees.

As the first crisp days of autumn came, the linesmen were working feverishly in sight of their goal, Salt Lake City. Gamble received word that he had a slight edge on the men approaching from the east. Pony riders, dashing back and forth along their rapidly shortening run, kept spurring both sides with results of the race.

Finally, on October 22, Gamble and his men set up the last pole inside the Mormon city and connected the new telegraph office with the Pacific coast. Gamble had won the race and the prize. The men threw away their battered shovels, flung their dusty hats in the air, then began to relieve the kind of thirst you can get only on the Great American Desert.

As messages went clicking across the far-flung wires, the hoofs of the original Pony Express were stilled. This epic of great riding to carry the mail through at all costs had lasted just eighteen months. The march of man and the rapid progress of the telegraph had made the Pony Express obsolete after a year and a half.

A heart-stirring drama of fearless men and sturdy ponies had slipped back into history—and legend.

When Pete Raines saw that peaceful palaver didn't work, he used dinero and bullet bait to tree the . . .

Hardrock Basin Vulture

By Spencer Frost

THERE had been no rain in Hardrock Basin for two years, and the cattlemen faced disaster. Pete Raines, the merchant and civic father of the town, carried a great load of responsibility on his broad shoulders as he hurried to the Roundup Saloon in search of Ed Salter, the banker.

Pete disliked going to the saloon for that purpose. A banker, he thought, should conduct his business at the bank. Salter owned controlling interest in the Cattlemen's Bank, and he also owned the ES ranch, the Roundup Saloon, and nearly every business in town except the railroad and Pete's general store. Bud Collins was cashier in the bank, but about all Bud did was keep books. Salter himself handled the loans, and Pete needed a loan. He found Salter in his stuffy little office which opened at one end of the bar in the Roundup.

Salter showed no pleasure at seeing Pete. He was of middle age, medium height, heavy-set, abrupt, with shifting gray eyes and stubborn black hair that was turning gray at the edges.

"I told you last week that I won't make that loan," he declared in his habitual monotone, waving a flabby hand toward the door in dismissal.

Pete ignored the implication, seated his considerable bulk so that he faced Salter across the desk, and shoved his old brown Stetson well back on his iron-gray head

"I'm giving you one more chance, Salter," he declared firmly. "This drought will pass, the rains will come, the grass will grow, the cattle will fatten, and the ranchers will have money to pay their bills. They're the best security on earth. That's the security I'm offering you for that $20,000 loan."

"Can't use it," Salter declared. "I run a bank on a business basis, not on sentiment."

"Salter, my store provides the necessities of life for the people of Hardrock Basin. Its shelves are as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, and I need the money to buy merchandise. That's not sentiment."

"The answer is still no."

"I promised the basin folks that I'd carry them through the drought; that is as far as flour and bacon and beans and a few pairs of shoes will serve to carry them through. If I fail, they'll have to leave their homes and move out. A few have already moved."

"It grieved me to see it, Raines," Salter declared sanctimoniously. "I helped those poor people all possible. I bought title to their land just so they would have some money to move on."

"You paid," said Pete pointedly, "about ten per cent of what the land is worth. You'd do as much for the rest of them. In six months you'd own the entire basin—at ten cents on the dollar."

"All right, Raines. Who else will pay that much?"

"Salter," said Pete, leaning forward in his chair, "you may be a smart banker, and you can drive a hard bargain, but you don't know Hardrock Basin ranchers. The rumor has spread that my store is closing its doors because you won't loan me money to carry on. The ranchers don't like it."

"I'm not concerned about that."

"You will be. These ranchers—men like Jim Zellers and Hank Witham—they're tolerant, but they can be goaded too far. Their kids are hungry and they're losing their homes. They're desperate. They're apt to get rough."

"Yeah? And just what can they do about it?"

"They can take the Roundup Saloon apart and hang you to a limb on that cottonwood out back."

"Are you threatening me, Raines?"

"Warning you."

EXCEPT for a defiant tightening of the eyes, Salter showed no reaction. Leisurely he reached across the oak-top desk and pulled a cord which apparently operated a signal in the adjacent barroom. The door swung open. A dark, slender furtive-looking young man stepped inside. Pete recognized him as Ras Dole whose occupation seemed to be loafing around the Roundup.

Salter said sharply, "The boys."

Dole vanished, but returned in a moment with Leo Mack and Tony

Monohans, two of Salter's ES ranch hands. Mack and Monohans were rough-visaged, roughly clad, and armed with side guns. Salter waved a soft hand toward the three of them.

"I am prepared," he said grimly. "I have more men available, plenty of them. Furthermore, in case of trouble the sheriff and his deputy will have to protect me because I am within the law."

"Looks like you were anticipating trouble," Pete said.

"I hate trouble," Salter declared glibly. "It would make my heart bleed if any of the ranchers should get killed. I want you to see that we have no trouble, Raines."

"The trouble," said Pete, "won't be of my making."

"I repeat that you are to see there is no trouble," Salter snapped. "I'm not telling you *how* to stop it; I'm telling you to do it. And in case you should fail—" Salter paused and rolled his eyes significantly toward his three henchmen, "yes, in case there is trouble, Mr. Raines, one of my men will promptly kill you."

"Why you cold-blooded crook!" Pete cried, jumping to his feet. "If you think you can bluff—"

His words were choked off. A strong arm suddenly locked around his throat and a knee planted in the small of his back bent him backward. He was conscious of the coarse, foul-smelling face of Leo Mack, and then he was whirled with a thud against the office wall. There was a flash of steel, a thud, and he turned his head to see the handle of a knife quivering in the wall three inches from his ear. Ras Dole, white teeth gleaming, was grinning at him.

"You see what I mean, Raines," Salter said quietly, his face inscrutable.

A torrent of words welled up in Pete, but he checked them, and with fury mounting within him, he strode to the board walk outside.

The viciousness of Salter's threat stunned Pete. He had long known that the man was greedy, unscrupulous, and money-mad. But that he should coldly plan to hog the basin and hold it with gunfire and bloodshed seemed incredible. Here, then, was proof of the fact which Pete had suspected: Salter was refusing the loan for the purpose of forcing the ranchers out!

HIS blood boiled at the realization that Salter would force him to use his unquestioned influence with the ranchers to preserve peace. Peace! He would call in the ranchers. They would clean out Salter and his gang. There would be no peace made with crooks and killers! There would be war!

But a disturbing realization sobered him. It chilled him, and left him sick and trembling inside. The ranchers could clean out Salter's gang. When the facts were made known to them, they would do it without question. But it would be a fight—a grim, deadly fight.

Salter had enough backing that he was confident of security. How many men he had on the ES ranch, Pete did not know; but Mack and Monohans were samples of their kind—hard men and killers. That meant bloodshed and dead men. There would be widows and orphans and tears and heartaches and broken lives in the ranch homes already made desolate by the drought. No, that must not be. Not a single rancher must lose his life. There had to be some other way to stop Salter's greedy scheme.

Slowly Pete walked back across the sun-parched street to his store, each step stirring up little puffs of hot, gray dust. For two years Pete had been holding out the succoring hand of encouragement and material aid to the drought-stricken ranchers. They had been years of heat and dust and sand when cattle died like flies and indolent buzzards hung in the sky and the face of a strong man paled at the hopelessness of it.

"Don't quit," Pete urged. "If you

do, you lose everything. I'll see that you have food and clothing. The rains will come."

But now Pete's cash reserve was exhausted, his credit ruined by unpaid bills, and his long-drawn-out effort to get a loan a failure. And the ranchers of Hardrock Basin looked to him for food!

Old Dick Weaver, Pete's clerk and handy man, sat on the knife-marked bench in front of the store awaiting Pete's return. Dick was a confirmed pessimist, as thin as a post, and as hard as a mesquite knot. He called himself Pete's partner in the store, but he had not a penny invested.

"Told you it wouldn't do no good," he greeted Pete. "That sharp-eyed Salter knows which side his bread is buttered on. The more ranchers starve out, the more land he can gobble."

"Salter's investing lots of money around here," Pete remarked thoughtfully as he seated himself upon a nail keg.

"Mebbe he's usin' up all the bank's lendin' money," Dick suggested.

"There's a limit to what he can spend," said Pete.

"They's gotta be," Dick agreed. "Besides, there's that $15,000 the bank lost to them train robbers last month."

"The bank didn't lose that," Pete corrected. "The express company had to make it good."

"Killed the train messenger, too. The express company can't make that good. You know, Pete, I've been wonderin' how them robbers knowed that money was on that train."

"We'll probably know the answer to that, Dick, when we learn who did the robbing."

"Well, I told you this bust was comin'," Dick declared. "You're too trustful, Pete. Allus trustin' folks. Here you are trustin' ever'body in Hardrock Basin and not a dad-gummed one of 'em can pay you. You're broke and sunk in debt, and yet you go on trustin' folks that ain't got a cent to pay with."

"The rains will come," said Pete.

"There you go—even trustin' the weather man."

"You know, Dick," said Pete thoughtfully, "it's good policy to trust a man for what he is."

"Well you're goin' to have a chance. I see Ike Lawton drivin' in yonder."

IKE LAWTON, once prosperous but now broke, left his team untied at the hitching rail. They were too fagged to run.

"Howdy, Pete. Howdy, Dick," he greeted. "Give me a swig of that water. I'm drier'n a sandstorm."

Ike gulped three tin cupfuls of the lukewarm liquid from the wooden keg which sat on a counter inside the door. His eyes were red and his face seamed with the weather and with the more devastating lines of worry.

"Pete, I've gotta have more grub," he declared apologetically. "Had hoped somethin' might turn up so I wouldn't have to call on you agin."

"Well, Ike," said Dick, "you sure come to the wrong place to git it. Our shelves is as bare as a salt lick."

And then Ike proceeded to explain to him the foodless situation in Hardrock. "Now wouldn't that jar your eyeteeth!" he exclaimed. "My Sidney was over to Hank Witham's yesterday and heard that they is trouble a-brewin', but I couldn't believe it. Seems like Hank and some o' the others is purty badly stirred up."

That a large number of the ranchers were "stirred up" was indicated promptly by the arrival of Jim Zellers and Hank Witham in from their respective ranches, visibly worried and disturbed. Others came in, too, as Dick, serving as spokesman, explained the situation to them. Pete, very meditative, ambled back to the end of his store where at a little cribbed-off and badly littered desk he carried on the bookkeeping end of the business.

He seated his considerable bulk in the comfortable cane-bottom chair, lifted first one big foot and then the other to the desk top, folded his arms across his ample bosom, and dropped his head drowsily upon his chest. To all appearances Pete was preparing to take a nap. Actually he was plunged in thought. Here in this secluded spot with his head hung low and his feet perched high, he had reached the decisions and formed the policies which had built up the heretofore prosperous community of Hardrock Basin.

For a long time Pete sat thus, his eyes closed, breathing slowly, apparently oblivious of the rising tide of angry voices outside. At length he let his feet down to the floor, located pen and paper and wrote a full-page letter which he sealed and stamped. Letter in hand he hurried to the store front.

The gathering had increased to probably thirty men, angry men with frustration and desperation in their faces. They grew silent as Pete stepped through the door.

HANK WITHAM spoke first. "See here, Pete. Us ranchers built this bank in a manner of speaking, fer there wouldn't be no bank if we didn't give it our business. Ed Salter ain't got no right to turn us down by refusin' you a loan to carry us over."

"Salter is within his legal rights," Pete declared.

"Bein' legal ain't always bein' right," asserted Jim Zellers.

"We got kids to feed," declared another.

"And I sure as shootin' ain't goin' to see mine go hungry," shouted an angry voice. "I'm fer havin' a showdown with Salter right now."

"Men," Pete urged, "I've used every effort I know to get the money. But Salter claims that banking regulations won't allow him to loan it to me. I know how you feel; but we can't have violence. We can't afford it. The law will have to back Salter, and in the long run we'd lose. We'd get nothing but wounded men and widows and orphans and suffering and heartaches. We still wouldn't get the money."

"Then you're tellin' us to walk meekly up to Salter and turn our land over to him fer a song jest because he's tricked us and starved us out?"

"No. I'm telling you the same thing I've told you for two years—stay on your ranches. Fight it out."

"We want to stay. But we've gotta have grub. You promised to see we got it. Where is it?"

"Men," Pete pleaded, "I'm making one more effort to raise the money to buy more goods. It'll take a few days. In the meantime, we've got a little meat and flour and potatoes left. Dick'll parcel out enough to tide you over three or four days. You take it with the understanding that you go back home and start no trouble."

After the crowd, some grumbling, others only half pacified, had departed, Dick declared, "They's trouble comin'. You stopped it today, pardner. But it'll take a different kind o' talk next time—lead and smoke talk."

"I'm hoping it doesn't come to that, Dick."

"Yeah—I know. Old trustful Pete. Ex-cowboy turned storekeeper and ain't never learnt that you can't trust folks like you can trust a cow. Wouldn't s'prise me none to hear that you're trustin' Ed Salter next."

"That, Dick, is exactly what I'm doing."

"Huh? You're what?"

"Trusting Salter to pull us out of this hole."

"Well, of all the dumb—" Dick began, but Pete checked him.

"Dick, I've learned that it's safe to trust a man to do the thing he wants to do. Salter wants to hog the basin. I'm trusting him to leave no stone unturned to accomplish just that thing."

"Pete," said Dick, shaking his head, "you've read too many books. A lotta learnin' sure muddles things up."

FOR the next two days Pete lurked in his office, his feet on the desk, deliberative and uncommunicative. Even Dick spoke to him but seldom. In midafternoon of the second day after Pete mailed his letter, Ted Bowman, the depot agent, came hurrying into the store with a yellow telegram envelope. Pete tore it open and read it quickly.

"Thanks, Ted," he said to the agent. "I'll be seeing you about train time."

Shortly before sundown Pete walked over to the Roundup Saloon and found Salter in his office.

"You may be interested to learn that there will be no trouble with the ranchers," he said. "You can let your gunslingers go back to the ranch."

"Can you guarantee that, Raines?"

"Most folks accept my word. But to ease your nerves I've got a loan coming on the six-thirty this evening."

"A loan! Fine. That's going to mean a lot," Salter exclaimed with considerable surprise.

Several loiterers were gathered at the depot waiting the arrival of the stub train from the east. Pete sat on the edge of the platform, not mixing with the crowd. In a few minutes Tony Monohans sauntered up and joined a group at the other end of the depot.

Monohans was still loafing around when the train departed and Pete signed the receipt for the sealed little package the express agent gave him. With the package under his arm, Pete hurried to the store. Dick eyed him questioningly.

"That," said Pete, "is the bundle that ends bankruptcy, fills the flour bin, puts bacon on the grocer shelves and beans in the ranchers' stomachs. That, my friend, is what we whip the drought with."

"Purty big order," said Dick dryly. "What's in it?"

"On the wrapping it's marked $20,000."

"Twenty thou— Now look here, Pete, where'd you go and scare up money like that?"

"I wrote Harry Lake over in High Fork what we were up against, and bless me, he came across."

"Where'd Harry Lake git $20,000?"

"Mebbe the banker in High Fork isn't as cranky about loans as the banker in Hardrock."

"Reckon he ain't hoggin' the whole country. What're we goin' to do with that stuff tonight? It's too late to put it in the bank."

"I'll take it home with me," said Pete. "I'm a light sleeper."

"They's goin' to be two light sleepers watchin' that package," said Dick. "I'm goin' with you."

"Aunt" Martha Raines, as Pete's wife was affectionately known, was visiting in the East to escape the heat, so Pete and Dick had the house all to themselves. Pete stuffed the package into a bureau drawer near his bed. Dick spread a blanket and a pillow on the floor of the front room, saying he could hear and see better from there; and he took an old army pistol along as a bedfellow.

IT WAS a moonless night with a thin covering of clouds blinking the stars on and off and a lazy southwest breeze faintly promising relief from the heat. Pete lay diagonally across the bed from which position he could command a view out of two windows. Near at hand lay a six-gun, and a pick handle which he had smuggled into the room unobserved by Dick.

It probably was soon after midnight that Dick tiptoed into Pete's room and shook him vigorously.

"Wake up, Pete. They's some jasper sneakin' round my winder," he whispered excitedly.

"I heard him," Pete replied. "I also heard you snoring."

"That snore was a invite to come in," said Dick.

Back in the front room Dick began snoring loud enough to be heard a

block. There were subdued voices at the door where only the screen door was closed. Pete heard a ripping sound as a knife cut through the screen wire, and the fumbling of fingers searching for the latch. The door squeaked slightly as it opened. Pete waited, his back to the wall, his pick handle poised and the six-shooter under his belt. A form took shape against the faint starlight in the doorway, and close behind came another. A voice whispered.

"Locate the old cuss by his snores. Be sure you knife him in the right spot."

Pete swung his pick handle. There was a thud, a grunt, and the crash of a falling body. The man nearest the door jerked back, and Pete swung again, felt that he had landed a glancing blow, and the man went sprawling across the room.

"Light, Dick. Strike a match," Pete cried.

A match flared. Dick held it aloft with his left hand while his right hand covered the room with his pistol. Pete was poised straddle-legged beside the door, club in one hand and gun in the other.

There was no need for guns. Pete's club had done good work. One man sprawled motionless on the floor. The other lay across Aunt Martha's sofa, shaking a dazed head while he feebly attempted to bring a six-shooter into play. Pete snatched the gun from his hand. Dick applied the match to a lamp.

"Well, I'm a monkey's uncle! It's my old friend Tony Monohans!" Dick exclaimed, staring at the man on the sofa. "How could such a nice feller talk so free and easy about stickin' a knife blade between my ribs?"

"My ribs," Pete corrected. "He thought those were my snores."

Dick turned the unconscious man over on the floor.

"Ras Dole," he announced.

"Should be," Pete agreed. "He's good with a knife."

Monohans sat up, his eyes growing terrified.

"You were careless," Pete said to him. "Perhaps housebreaking is not your strong point, Monohans."

"I ain't talkin'," Monohans snarled.

"Them's fittin' last words," Dick declared. "I'd jest as well shoot him right here."

"And mess up Martha's carpet? Go get a rope."

They tied Monohans into a straight chair and gagged him with a pillow slip, then Dick went to notify the sheriff.

PETE was sprinkling water in Dole's face when Dick returned with George Ware, the sheriff. Dole was emerging from a comatose state, a transition evidently attended by visionary terrors, for he sat up wildly swinging an imaginary knife at an imaginary foe. The knife he had intended to use on Pete lay on the floor halfway across the room.

"Dole," Pete said, "somebody hit you a whale of a jolt."

"I don't know what happened," Dole said weakly.

"Well, when we struck a match you were laying like a dead man on the floor, and Tony Monohans was over there fumbling around the sofa like he was looking for something."

"You mean—" Dole looked bewildered and ran an inquisitive hand over his head—"you mean some jasper hit me from behind?"

"I'll say he did," Dick exclaimed. "You got such a lump back there you'll have to wear two hats."

A growing fury slowly replaced the bewilderment in Dole's face. He burst out with a flow of profanity.

"Shut up," Ware ordered, shaking him. "What were you doin' here?"

"I ain't sayin'," Dole snarled.

"Dole," Pete suggested, "it looks like Monohans didn't want to split with you. He wanted it all."

Dole shot a glare at the helpless Monohans who was struggling with

his bonds and making inarticulate noises.

"It's a wonder," Pete said slowly, "that Monohans didn't try that trick when you boys robbed the express car. He might have got away with the whole swag."

Dole glared up at Pete in terrified surprise.

"Monohans won't acknowledge he killed the train messenger," Pete continued. "It looks like he'll try to pin the killing on you, Dole."

"He's a liar!" Dole stormed.

"You're good with a knife, Dole," Pete insisted. "How come you to use a gun on that messenger?"

"I didn't do it, I tell you," Dole screamed. "Tony got nervous. He thought the messenger was reaching for his shotgun."

"That's clear enough," Ware exclaimed. "Tony shot the messenger. But how did you boys know Pete had money in his house tonight?"

"I ain't talkin'," Dole snarled.

"I'll say you ain't," came a thick voice behind them.

The three men wheeled. Oozing through the doorway was the bulky form of Ed Salter flanked by Leo Mack and Fred Brady who also was an ES hand. Three guns covered the surprised group, and reluctantly their hands went upward.

"They musta seen me bringin' the sheriff," Dick moaned.

"Men, put down them guns," Ware ordered. "I'm the law."

"Mack," Salter snapped, ignoring the sheriff, "cut Tony loose."

Monohans was fairly spluttering when released.

"Boss, Dole squealed!" he cried. "I warned you not to trust that snake."

"What'd he say?" Salter snapped.

"They tricked him. Made him think I slugged him. He spilled ever'thing. Hell, you gotta clean house."

Salter turned upon Dole, his eyes hard and murderous in the lamplight. He was thinking fast. Pete read the trend of his thoughts.

"You're sunk, Salter," he said quietly. "More killings won't clear you."

WITHOUT removing his eyes from Dole, Salter snapped, "We've gotta finish this quick and get out. Through the back way. Cut over to the saloon. We'll make it look like Dole had it out with them and they all got brushed off. But I want that money first. Tony, you know the layout here. Find that money."

"You're forgettin' somethin', boss," Monohans cried. "Take the guns off'n these men."

"Leo, pull their teeth," Salter snapped. "Tony, get moving."

Salter's voice died in a sharp gasp. Pete was aware that Ras Dole, still seated on the floor, had flipped a hand, that a silverlike streak flashed through the room with Dole catapulting after it, and Salter was doubling up over the knife which had sunk haft-deep into his paunch.

There was a moment of immobility, then pandemonium broke loose. Mack and Brady fired first, simultaneously, their bullets catching Ras Dole in his wild dive at Salter. Pete's gun and Ware's roared a thunderous echo, and Dick's big pistol joined in, the loudest of all.

Suddenly there was silence broken only by Salter's groans as he slumped against the wall feebly plucking at the bloody knife handle that protruded from his middle. Dole lay face-downward near Salter's feet. Monohans lay gasping across the supine body of Leo Mack, and Brady was sprawled grotesquely near the back door. For a moment the survivors looked at each other in silent wonderment.

"Where," asked Ware, "did that knife come from?"

"Dole threw it," said Pete.

"But Dole didn't have the knife," Dick objected. "I seen it on the floor before the rumpus started."

"It was laying near my foot," said Pete. "I kind of kicked it over to where Dole could reach it."

"You kicked that knife to Dole?" Dick rebuked. "When you knowed he brought it here to kill you with?"

"At the moment," Pete replied, "Dole was more interested in killing Salter."

"It's hard to believe," Ware exclaimed. "A banker turned robber!"

"Greed," said Pete. "It does things to a man. Salter saw the chance to hog the basin and he needed more money to buy up the land as the ranchers starved out. He sent for money for his bank, then had his thugs rob the express company of it en route."

"But how did Salter know you had money in the house?"

"I tipped him off," said Pete.

"You tipped him off?" Dick snorted.

"Because I wanted him to try to steal the money. I wanted to nab one of his henchmen and make him squeal."

"That's jest nuthin' but trustin' to luck," Dick said.

"Not luck, Dick. It's safe to trust a man to do the thing that's natural for him to do. Salter was vicious and desperate. It was a safe bet he'd try to get that money from me. His thugs are low killers. It's safe to believe they'd squeal under the right kind of pressure. I kind of arranged things so they'd have a chance to follow their inclinations."

"Yeah, and they might've got that money," Dick protested.

"They wouldn't," said Pete. "Look here."

He brought the sealed package, laid it on the table, and cut the wrapping with his knife. The wrapping fell back, disclosing four neatly pressed bundles of paper. It was pieces of newspaper cut in the size and shape of United States currency.

"That," said Pete with an air of satisfaction, "is what I borrowed from Harry Lake. I wrote him what we were up against and asked him to express me a package that looked like money, and to telegraph me when to expect it. I trusted Salter to grab the bait."

"Salter sunk by a bundle of newspaper scraps!" Ware exclaimed. "That ends Salter's management of the bank. Bud Collins will be making the loans from now on."

"We can git money from Bud all right," Dick declared.

"And there's the little item of $10,000 reward from the express company for them train robbers," said Ware. "Pete, it looks like Hardrock Basin is safe."

"Pete trusts so," said Dick soberly.

Come an' Get It!

By Martin Prescott

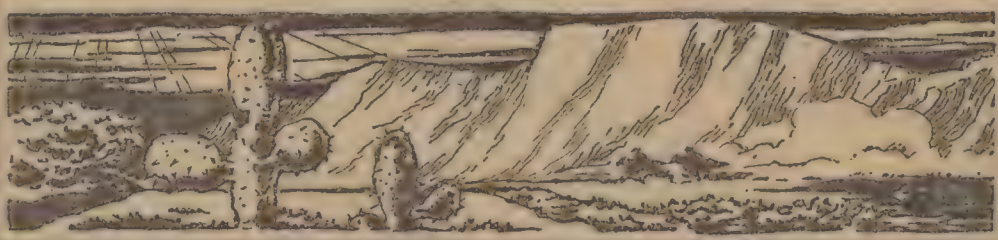
AMONG customs strange of the Western range
  Where cowpokes herd the cattle,
Is the need for java like molten lava
  To prime the boys for battle.

In the early morn when the sun is born,
  Old cookie grabs his pot,
And with loving care he puts it there
  Where the greasewood blaze is hot;
While the liquid roil of the water's boil
  Claims the ground-up coffee bean.

And the sands do pass through the hourglass
  As the coffee heaves and bubbles,
While cookie sings of the joys it brings
  To cowboys deep in troubles;
And the stuff turns black as a Brahma's back
  And as strong as Pecos Bill.

Then into the brew goes an old horseshoe
  To probe the potion's power,
And if it sails then the nectar fails
  And must boil another hour;
For the final test of the range's best
  Will come when the horseshoe melts.

In the West they say, in their homely way,
  That the cowboy has no blood—
That through the body of every waddy
  Flows coffee in a flood.



Too Late for a Peaceful Grave

By
Dean Owen

Before meting out punishment to that holdup hombre, the sheriff stepped out of bounds — and into the gallows' shadows himself.

VIC TENERVAN, they said, was born to hang. But even though I was instrumental in his death, I knew that we might have saved him. Myself and all the other noble citizens of Kingport. I had never wanted the job of being sheriff, but when old Neimier died one spring morning, a committee of businessmen

decided I should wear the star until next election. It seemed like an easy way to make some money and finish paying for the ranch I expected Jane to share with me. But I had not figured on this Vic Tenervan business.

A cold drizzle fell on the solemn crowd that gathered in back of the Kingport jail the morning Vic Tenervan died. In spite of the chill, my hands were sweated as I paced my office. Then it was over, and the saddle tramp I had hired for the job of pulling the trap lever came in for his pay. A stubby, sandy-haired man, he shook the rain off his slicker and hat. His name was Steuben. Just a range bum. I had asked no questions of him, so anxious was I to have somebody else do the job for me.

"Most sheriffs do their own hangin'," Steuben grinned, as he took the thirty-five dollars the county allowed for an outside executioner.

I was big in those days and while I was no gunfighter, they said any man was a fool to risk my knuckles in his face. Steuben must have sensed my anger, for he took his money and got out.

An ominous silence hung over the town, and through the jail-office window, I watched the spectators slog through the mud on their way uptown to discuss the passing of Vic Tenervan. Several of them glanced at me, but there was no friendly word, only cold stares. The town would be asking questions of me before this day was out, so I prepared myself.

I turned to the desk where Vic Tenervan's worldly goods were lying: seven dollars and an old .44. Not much to leave behind for all the agony he had caused. Only a reckless fool like Tenervan would have tried to hold up the Kingport stage with Matt Haley on the box, and not know that Haley would rather die than submit.

IT WAS good to let the town cool off, I decided, so it was an hour before I ventured down Center Street. Against the backdrop of the Sierras I could see the zigzag scar that worked upslope to the deep timber; the new lumber flume that Steve Karbow's crew was constructing.

And I could see Steve Karbow talking to Jane in front of her dry-goods store. As always, sight of Jane Lathrop stirred my blood. Her russet-colored hair was shiny in the rain, little drops of moisture standing out like beads. I marveled at her slender waist and the full proud line and curve of her body.

They had their backs to me, but it was Jane's brother, Ken, who saw me. He was a cocky youngster of seventeen, blond and big for his age. He sat the saddle of a chestnut drawn up beside the walk. At a word from him, Karbow and Jane turned to stare at me.

"Sheriff Vern Buckley," Karbow said, a trace of sarcasm in his smooth voice. In spite of bossing a tough construction crew, Steve Karbow had city manners. I felt clumsy in Jane's presence by comparison. He was an inch under my six feet, slim and dapper.

Jane laid a hand on my arm, looking up at me with her cool, gray eyes. She was not a beautiful woman, but there was dignity in her face. I had watched her grow up here in Kingport, she and her brother, and there was a tie between us, for our families had been among the first settlers. But the tie was thinning, and I knew it stemmed from Steve Karbow's coming to Kingport.

Jane said, "They're saying some things about you, Vern. And I don't want to believe them."

"What things?" I asked softly, my eyes on the silently amused Karbow.

"They say you didn't want to see Vic Tenervan die. That you got him so drunk he didn't know what was happening to him."

My stomach throbbed. "Yes, it's true."

Jane pushed a hand along her white throat, staring at me. Karbow said, "Tenervan deserved to know when he

dropped through the trap. But instead, he was dead drunk. Ask Haley's widow how much she appreciates your consideration for the man who murdered her husband. Here she comes."

A rustle of black satin, a stiff, white face. The gaunt woman came along the walk, nodded to Jane and Karbow. When her eyes met mine I saw that she hated me. Then she was gone and my knees trembled.

Ken Lathrop's horse stirred restlessly. "Anything more you want me to do, Steve?" Ken asked from the saddle.

So it was Steve now, not Mr. Karbow. And for the first time I was aware that Ken Lathrop had not spoken to me when I came up.

"Get back to the job," Steve Karbow said. "I'll be out later."

THE blond kid rode out of town at a high lope. As I watched him go I couldn't help but think of Vic Tenervan and how he had looked not many years back. Vic Tenervan had died today at twenty-three.

"I didn't know Ken was working for you, Karbow," I said.

Before Karbow could answer, Jane said, "Ken's a man now. He wanted to earn his own way."

"That's no place for a kid like him," I said. "Have you ever taken a close look at Karbow's crew and seen the kind of men they are?"

"I take that as a personal insult, Buckley," Steve Karbow said, his black eyes glittering. Whether by intent or accident he put a hand on his belt so that his coat fell open and I could see the ivory handle of a pistol in its harness.

Ever since Karbow had come here there had been talk that one day he and I would tangle. For everyone knew we were both after the same woman.

Jane's cheeks drained of color. "You shouldn't have said that, Vern."

The blood pounded in my temples as Karbow gave Jane a funny little bow and crossed the street to the Dorset Bar.

I caught Jane's wrists and they were cold to my touch. "Tomorrow's Sunday. I'll rent a rig. Then I'll have a chance to tell you everything."

She stared up at me, a tiny frown between her blue eyes. "Did you feel sorry for Vic Tenervan, or was it some other reason," she said, ignoring my suggestion. "He killed Matt Haley in cold blood. How could you have sympathy for such a man?"

"Give me a chance to tell you—tomorrow." Perhaps it was the sincerity in my voice, for she smiled and the warmth flowed back to her wrists.

"All right, Vern," she said, and turned into her store.

I watched her go, seeing the mass of damp hair, the smooth line of her shoulders beneath a flowered dress. My diaphragm tightened momentarily when I thought of losing her to Steve Karbow . . .

In those days the Dorset Bar was the heart and blood of Kingport. But instead of going there directly to face the men who had put me in office, I walked the length of Center Street. Jed Pawling, a graying lath of a man, sat on the loading platform of his one-coach Kingport stage line. Few passengers came to Kingport and it was rumored he was hard put for cash. But it was expected that the town would boom once the flume was finished and the lumber company built a mill here.

I had had no official contact with this newcomer, other than it was his stage that Vic Tenervan had tried to hold up. There were around fifty men working on the mountain in Karbow's crew so their payroll would have made a nice haul if Tenervan had been able to finish his job.

Pawling shifted his chair, stretching out his long legs. "Hear the town's riled at you, Buckley."

I swung a hip over the edge of the platform and rested. "The town can go to hell," I snapped.

THERE was something about Pawling's eyes that weighed a man. I could feel him cataloguing my features, the brown hair and eyes, my big nose.

"I never knew Tenervan like you folks did," Pawling went on, his eyes still on my face. "But seems to me the folks shouldn't be so dead set about what you done, seein' as how Tenervan grew up here. It was my stage he stuck up. And I ain't sore at you."

Those were the first decent words spoken to me all morning and I warmed to the man.

Pawling said, "Matt Haley was gittin' too old to drive. Should have let him go, I reckon. A man shouldn't be a blamed fool. Now if he'd have just sat tight when Tenervan put the gun on him, none of this would've happened. But Haley had to be a hero and go to work with that sawed-off shotgun of his."

"Haley's reputation paid off," I reminded him. "Nobody tried tackling the stage until Tenervan."

"A reputation ain't much good when you're dead," Pawling drawled. Those eyes of his, somewhere between a cold blue and a steel gray, lowered to his pipe. "Still figure there was somebody else with Tenervan on that job?"

"I don't feel any different than I did at the trial."

"Good," Pawling said. "Hope you get him."

At that moment Steuben, the lank tramp I had hired to send Vic Tenervan kicking into eternity, stepped out of the stage office and shocked to a halt at sight of me.

"My new driver," Pawling said, jerking a thumb at the man. "Takin' Haley's place."

I nodded to him and started uptown. His words still burned in my brain: "Most sheriffs do their own hangin'."

When I stepped into the Dorset Bar it seemed that every man was holding his breath, it was that quiet. Chalfant, the fat barkeep, set out my bottle. I poured a drink.

Mayor Anlid, fat and slick as butter, said, "Kingport's goin' to be a thrivin' community when the mill gets built. And you've fair like to disgraced this town. What was the idea, Buckley? Tenervan was so damned drunk he had to be carried to the scaffold." Mayor Anlid puffed out his chest. "Lots of visitors here today for the hangin'. We do business with these people and what happened today don't look right."

I stared at the little fat man, conscious of the eyes that were on me. "Next time," I told him, "do your hanging on the Fourth of July when the carnival comes. Then you can have a real show. No sense in disappointing folks."

Steve Karbow had been in the back of the big room. Now I saw him at the fringe of the crowd, jingling a stack of silver dollars in his well-kept hands.

"Maybe you didn't think Vic Tenervan was guilty," he said.

MY KNEES began to shake and I could feel the blood heat my face as I looked at the bank of silent faces. I kept telling myself to cool off. This was no place to pick a fight, not with half of Karbow's tough crew at his back. And besides, a sheriff isn't supposed to settle his private disputes while he's wearing a badge.

"Vic Tenervan was guilty as hell," I said. "But he was no more guilty than every man in Kingport."

The silence was shocking.

"It—it's like saying we're all responsible for Matt Haley's death," Mayor Anlid stammered.

"Tenervan came here to Kingport when he was eleven. His mother died and his old man cashed in his chips at Yuma Prison for rustling. Nobody ever gave Vic a chance. Did any man in Kingport ever offer him a decent job? No. He was hanging around saloons when he was fifteen, wearing a gun a year later. It was small stuff

at first, stealing grain out of the feed store. Then he got away with half a dozen mules. After that there was nothing anybody could do with him."

Mayor Anlid's fat face was livid. "Vic Tenervan was always a no-good thief like his old man. Bad blood tells."

"Maybe. But just maybe we could have steered him right. Then he wouldn't have killed old Matt Haley."

Steve Karbow jingled his silver dollars. "Are you pinning wings on yourself, Buckley?"

"I'm guilty as the rest. I went to school with him. I could have helped, but I didn't. Maybe next time we see a kid goin' wrong, we'll try and help him before it's too late."

I painted a picture for them of a vicious little runt named Vic Tenervan, who snapped at the world like a mongrel dog with a can tied to his tail. A frightened little man, a misfit.

"That's why I gave him the whisky," I concluded. "Because maybe it wasn't all his fault."

Steve Karbow's black eyes were amused. "That's the damndest speech I ever heard. You'll never win any votes with talk like that, Buckley."

"Nobody wants any votes," I said, trying to corral my temper and not making a very good job of it. "But as long as you wanted to horn in, I've got this to say. Somebody put Vic Tenervan up to stopping the stage."

Karbow's eyes lost their amusement. "Go on, Buckley," he said coldly. "Let's hear the rest of it."

"Somebody knew your payroll was coming in on that stage. That somebody tipped off Vic Tenervan."

"Maybe a lot of people knew it," Karbow said quickly.

"I'm sheriff and I didn't know it. You didn't see fit to let me know your plans."

"I'll bring the payroll in a shoebox if I feel like it," Karbow snapped. "And you won't know about it the next time either. That's what I think of you and your badge."

"That's a hell of a thing you're trying to do," Mayor Anlid said, shaking a plump forefinger at me. "'Tryin' to intimate Karbow tried to steal his own payroll."

"It's possible," I snapped. "He works for the lumber company. He doesn't own it."

Karbow said, "You can't talk me into killing you, Buckley. I'm not foolish enough to murder a sheriff."

HIS men started to move in around him, their angry eyes on my face. One word from him and they'd be on me, badge or no badge. But the thing had gone too far, and I couldn't stop.

"Vic Tenervan and you were pretty thick, a month or so back," I reminded Karbow. For there probably wasn't a man in town who hadn't seen them together.

"Tenervan worked for me!" Karbow snarled. "I fired him because he was no damned good."

Mayor Anlid said, "I'm surprised at you, Buckley. You're sore at Karbow because he's cuttin' your time with Jane Lathrop—"

I didn't hear the rest because I had stalked out the door, angered that I had let my temper slip.

That night when I went to walk Jane home from her store her brother Ken came to the door. "Jane's busy tonight," he said, his arrogant young eyes on my face. "And she said to tell you to never mind hiring that rig tomorrow."

I stared at him, regretting that I was not the kind of dashing figure like Steve Karbow who would draw a kid like this. I turned away for my shack at the edge of town, knowing that Jane had already heard what happened in the Dorset Bar that day.

Nothing was said about removing me from office, but election was two weeks off and I knew there was no chance I would make it even if I wanted to keep the job.

When I tried to sleep I kept seeing Vic Tenervan's face in the dark. I re-

membered that face when I had first seen it in Kingport, remembering how it had hardened with the passing years. Nobody in town had understood why I had felt sorry for Vic. Yes, I was as much to blame as the others.

In fact, the only friendly gesture I ever made was in giving him that whisky the night before he died. After he had taken the first drink he said, "I'm damned sorry it was Matt Haley I killed."

"Who put you up to it, Vic?"

But he wouldn't talk.

The ugly rumor began to spread around Kingport the next day. Jed Pawling told me about it first.

"They're claimin' maybe you got Vic Tenervan drunk so he wouldn't tell the truth at the last minute. That maybe you kept promisin' to let him escape, then figured you couldn't get away with it."

Pawling sat on the edge of his loading platform, picking his teeth with the blade of a jackknife.

The words dried up in my throat when I said, "Why would anybody say a thing like that?"

"Maybe somebody figures you and Tenervan was in on the holdup together."

I took a step toward him and Pawling held up his hands and shook his head. "Don't get riled at me. I'm only sayin' what I hear. I figured you ought to know."

Sweat was cold on my forehead. "It's Karbow," I said. "Who else would start a crazy story like that?"

Pawling ran a hand over his graying hair, his eyes on my face. "If it was me, I'd unpin that badge and go get him."

BUT Steve Karbow wasn't in town that day and when I inquired around I learned he would be in from the job that night. The whole town knew the rumor about me and I could see men stop and whisper after I had passed. I'm only human and it began to get under my skin. The only thing, I figured, was to face Karbow and have it out. But either way I'd lose. If I killed him Jane would never feel the same toward me, of that I was sure. And then, of course, there was the possibility he would kill me.

I was sitting in the shadows on the Dorset Bar gallery when Karbow and Ken Lathrop rode in. I could tell by the way they yelled and chattered that they were both drunk as fools. Karbow, I figured, must have been mighty sure of Jane to get her kid brother loaded up with whisky like that. Ken Lathrop was beginning to think he was tough and I knew it was Karbow's influence.

When Karbow lurched into the Dorset Bar, Ken Lathrop rode down to the livery leading Karbow's horse. About five minutes later gunfire rattled from the lower end of town near the stable.

I beat the crowd there, seeing Ken Lathrop weaving, a smoking gun in his hand. The hostler cowered by the wall.

"Nex' time," Ken Lathrop was shouting, "don't give me none of your sass!"

He must have heard me coming up behind him, for he whirled, bringing up the gun. But he never got a chance to fire. I hit him on the point of the jaw and he dropped.

Mayor Anlid had joined the crowd, pompous as usual. "You didn't have to hit him so hard, Buckley," he said.

"Maybe I should have let him blow a hole in me," I said acidly. The more I saw of Kingport, the more disgusted I became.

I saw Jane elbowing her way into the stable. At sight of her unconscious brother, she dropped to her knees beside him.

"He's not dead," I told her.

She raised her eyes to my face and I couldn't tell what I saw in the gray depths of them.

Just then I spotted Steve Karbow and something snapped in me. My hand shot out and my fingers found a handful of white shirt. Karbow

swore and tried to get his ivory-handled gun from beneath his coat. I got it for him and threw it into the gloomy depths of the stable.

"You got Ken Lathrop drunk!" I snapped. "He's starting to wear a gun! What're you trying to do, have him turn out like Vic Tenervan?"

His black eyes were hot against my face. "Someday when you're not wearing that badge, I'll kill you."

I slapped his face on both sides and flung him aside. His hat fell off, his long black hair hanging across his forehead. I shoved my way through the crowd. Men stepped quickly aside as if I might have the pox. By the time I got to the office, I was shaking.

THE next morning Jed Pawling came by the office and stuck his graying head in the door. "That Lathrop kid is sure gettin' to be a hell-raiser, ain't he?"

I made no reply.

It was three days later that I next saw Jed Pawling. This time he came riding into town bareback on one of the stagecoach horses. His pants leg was bloody. I rushed out of the office into the gathering crowd, and helped him to the ground. He had to hang onto the hitchrail for support.

"Somebody stuck up my stage," he panted, "and killed my new driver. Happened at Mill Creek Grade. Reckon the feller thought he'd done me in. I just laid there, playin' dead while he shot the lock off the strongbox and made off with Karbow's payroll."

"Did you get a look at this holdup man?" I asked.

"Young feller," Pawling gasped. "Might've had somebody else back in the brush coverin' for him."

My stomach suddenly tightened as we carried him to the doctor's house. By the time I had saddled up, there were ten men riding with me, Mayor Anlid pompous and loud as usual.

We found the coach all right, and the dead horse and the other two tied to a mesquite bush. This was one of those frequent days when no passengers had been coming into Kingport. Steuben was sprawled beside the road. In the brush not far off, I found two .30-30 shells and a lot of blood. I scowled at the shells and put them in my pocket.

According to what sign I could read, there had only been one bandit. We trailed him for a way. From the blood I figured he was badly wounded. But the tracks petered out on the lava rock near the mountains. It was getting dark so I decided he would probably try and get to the California side of the Sierras. It would be a long ride so I rode back to town, the others following.

Mayor Anlid forced his horse alongside mine. "Do—do you s'pose Vic Tenervan might not've been guilty after all? That the same fella that killed Matt Haley done this job today?"

I didn't answer. Let him stew awhile, I thought.

Neither Steve Karbow nor Ken Lathrop was in town when we rode in that evening. A wedge of fear began to build up in me.

When I went to the doctor's house to inquire about Jed Pawling, I learned the man had gone to his room behind the stage office. The wound was not serious.

I found Pawling sitting on the loading platform, smoking a pipe.

"You ought to be in bed," I said, trying to see his face in the darkness.

"Just a scratch," he said. "I figure to ride with you, Buckley."

"This is one job I'm doing alone," I told him flatly.

I started to turn away and Pawling said, "If it *is* young Lathrop, you wouldn't be of a mind to turn him loose, would you?"

There was no answer I could make to that. "How come you were a passenger on your own stage?" I asked abruptly, to change the subject.

"Figured somebody ought to be on the stage with the payroll comin' through," he said. "I didn't figure Steuben would be much of a hand."

"I'm paid to take those risks," I said angrily. "Why wasn't I told?"

"Karbow didn't want you to have anything to do with it."

WHEN I left Pawling, I was suddenly conscious of rapid steps coming behind me. I stopped and turned. It was Jane. She wore a shawl over her head, for the night was cold. In the light from a store front I could see the hollows under her eyes and the lines of tension around her red mouth.

"Vern," she said, "I'm sorry for the things I said. I—I just wanted you to know."

I put a hand under her chin and tilted her head back. "You've heard about the stage?"

A sob wracked her. "It couldn't be Ken. I know it couldn't."

"You thought he was pretty grown up yesterday," I said. "You resented it when I kept him from shooting up the town." It hurt me to see her cry. "If Ken is in it, there's somebody who put him up to it."

"Karbow," she said in a still, dead voice. As I started across the street, she caught my shirt sleeve. "You'll give Ken a chance, won't you?"

I tapped the badge on my shirt. "I didn't ask to wear this." I got my horse and left her standing there, not daring to look back.

As I rode slowly to my shack at the edge of town, I tried to turn the thing over in my mind. What would I do if I came face to face with Ken Lathrop? Shoot him? Turn him loose? I didn't have the answer to that.

It was while I was getting my gear together for the long, rugged trip over the Sierras that I heard the scratching on the shack wall. I blew out the lamp and got my gun. The scratching came again. Cautiously I stepped outside. Ken Lathrop lay face down, his blond head on my doorstep. After I got him inside on my cot I saw that he had been shot twice, once in the shoulder and once in the chest. There was a bruise on his scalp as if somebody had bent a gun barrel over his head or he had fallen on a rock.

I put my gun on the table beside the lamp I had lit, and stared at the graying face. His eyes opened.

"Vern," he gasped, clutching for my hand. "He come out to the job yesterday. Said you and Jane had a fight over what happened at the stable the other day. He—he said you slapped her. I was gunnin' for you, but when I got away from the camp he must've hit me over the head. When I—I come to, I was shot, and he must've thought he'd killed me."

I knew the answer, but I asked, "Who was it?"

"Jed Pawling. I—I seen the stage down on the road and seen him kill the driver. One minute they was talkin' friendly-like and the next minute Pawling kills him. And when he rides off for town I crawl to my horse and—"

He fell back on the cot, his eyes closed. I was bent over him, detecting a faint heartbeat, when the door opened. Jed Pawling walked into the shack, a gun in his hand. He seemed to read the truth in my eyes, for his face tightened.

"I told myself all along that it was a mistake to give that badge to a bright young fella like you. Damn it, Buckley, why didn't you go after Karbow and let him kill you? I tried to stir up a fight between you two, Lord knows. He's the better man with a gun, I know that for sure."

"You must have wanted money pretty bad to shoot yourself in the leg."

"Any fool could see I wasn't making any money with that stage line. Five thousand would see me quite a ways."

I BEGAN edging toward the table where my gun rested beside the lamp. "Too bad Tenervan didn't tell me you were the one behind him," I said. "It would have saved a lot of trouble."

Pawling shrugged. "He thought I'd get him out of jail at the last minute. But you saved me the trouble of killing him when you got him drunk."

Sweat broke out on my forehead when I moved another inch toward the table. Ken Lathrop began to moan. That kid needed a doctor. But there was that gun muzzle looking at me.

"Must have been a surprise when you got me out to Mill Creek Grade and found Ken Lathrop had got away," I said.

Pawling said, "You'll be a hero, Buckley. Dying in the line of duty when that hellion Lathrop tried to jump you. And I'll be a hero, too, for being in time to kill him. After you're dead maybe I can lift another of Steve Karbow's payrolls, that is if he doesn't catch me at it. Then I'd have to cut him down. But I can't go on killing everybody—"

He was cocking the gun when I leaped. I hit the table with my shoulder. The lamp blacked out. I was on my hands and knees in the sudden darkness, but I had my gun. His shot laced the air across my back. Then I shot from the floor, aiming where I thought his belt buckle would be, for that is the quickest way to bring a man down. I emptied the gun. He screamed once. Then I heard his body slap the floor . . .

Steve Karbow was the first man drawn to the shack by the sound of the gunshots. He came charging in, a .45 in his hand. Then he shocked to a halt at the sight of Jed Pawling's body. He looked at me questioningly and I said, "It was Pawling who was behind the whole thing."

I explained how things were as he stood there running a tongue over his lips. His silence irritated me and I said, "You and I have had our differences, Karbow. I'll have to admit I was wrong about you. Now either put up that gun or start shooting."

He gave me a tight smile. "You don't leave a man much choice."

I sucked in my breath. Slowly he holstered the gun.

"If it would do me any good with Jane," he said, "I'd take my chances with you. But I guess she knew who she was going to marry all along. I was a fool to horn in. Come on, let's get her brother to the doctor's. . . ."

After Jane and I were married we moved out to the ranch. Mayor Anlid wanted me to run for sheriff at the general election, but I'd had enough of badges. When Ken got well we sent him off to finish school. It was a little late, perhaps, but it was worth a try, and it panned out. Maybe if somebody had given Vic Tenervan that chance, he wouldn't have swung from a scaffold.

Silver Handles Make

Buzzards Gap lived up to its name — only the buzzards that roosted here didn't have wings. They used horses to make their raids and .45 fodder to prey on their victims.

Boot Hill Bait

Great
Action-Packed
Novelette

By Norman A. Daniels

CHAPTER I

Killing Mission

THE ugly, bloody-beaked birds after which Buzzards Gap was named, had long ago departed from the vicinity, but the name stuck and gradually became once more appropriate. The new buzzards were humans.

Marshal Jim Carey knew that better than any other man. Tall, lean and gun-fast, he often wondered how many more days he'd live. Buzzards Gap seemed to attract every owlhooter. They banded together and dared any lawman to budge them.

There was little co-operation from the citizens. Those owlhooters came by their gold easy and spent it that way. The fact that they shot up the town now and then, and regularly preyed on cowboys returning

from trail drives, made no difference. After some of the shooting affrays there were funerals along the main street, but the sight of gold makes the memory of some men extremely short.

Jim Carey pulled up his horse just before he topped the ridge. He ground-hitched the animal, walked to the ridge and looked down into the valley. Anson Ring's ranch seemed peaceful enough. A hound dog was stretched out before the front steps of the house, apparently sound asleep in the afternoon sun.

In the corral were half a dozen horses, quietly standing about. Nothing moved, not a sound could be heard. Jim Carey wondered if old Speck Martin was given to nightmares. According to Speck Martin, he'd overheard whispered plans of some of those owlhooters to clean out Anson Ring's ranch.

JIM CAREY went back to his horse and slipped the Winchester out of its saddle scabbard. He levered a bullet into the firing chamber and then walked down toward the ranch.

The closer he got, the quieter the place seemed. It was almost too quiet. Jim Carey slowed up a bit. He pivoted once, when he thought he heard the clank of a shod hoof against a rock somewhere back in the hills. He saw nothing. Carey walked toward the ranch house again. He called Anson Ring's name, but there was no response. Somewhat worried now, Carey walked faster.

He noticed the dark streak in the dirt beside the dog's head. Then he knew that dog was dead—shot to death and sprawled out there in a natural manner to deceive anyone who might come along, that the dark streak was blood.

Carey's rifle started up. A man stepped from the doorway to the porch. He wore a low-slung gun but didn't go for it. He didn't have to. From the two sides of the house came a pair of gunslicks. The barn had been hiding two more and this quartet had their guns leveled.

Carey dropped the rifle in the dirt, stepped over the dead dog and came to a halt at the porch steps. He studied the man who was laughing at him, saw a heavy-set, multiple-jowled individual with a big mouth and tiny eyes.

Bert Jillson managed law and order in Buzzards Gap better than Jim Carey, the marshal. For Jillson controlled the outlaws. As their leader, his natural enemy was the lawman and Jillson was grinning broadly now.

"Figgered you'd listen when we let that drunken old fool hear us plan to take this ranch. Figgered he'd run to you, Carey, and tell you and that you'd come here."

Carey said, "Tell your men to lower their guns and stand aside. Then you and me will have a go. How about that, Jillson?"

"Not me," Jillson shook his head. "I could beat you to the draw, but why should I even try? Tell you what, marshal. We'll let you start runnin'. I'll count up to twenty, kinda slow. Then the boys will see how good they are ventilatin' at long range."

"You murdered Anson Ring," Carey said coldly. "I haven't seen him, but I know he's dead."

"Let's say he was a mite slow on the trigger," Jillson corrected. "And you can also say he didn't have near as much gold up here as we figgered. Hardly worth killin' the jasper fer."

"I think," Carey said quietly, "that I'll kill you, Jillson."

Jillson's laughter died away and his face turned gray. But only for a moment. The laugh returned. "Hear what he says, boys?" Jillson shouted to his four men. "To kill me he's got to draw and when his fingers touch his gun, riddle him."

"I don't mean now," Carey said. "I know you've got the drop, but there'll be other days and other times,

Jillson. I'm carvin' your name on one of my bullets."

"The only carvin' that'll be done," Jillson said, "is when somebody cuts your name on a wood cross. Ain't you got ears, marshal? I said you'd have a chance to run, but that don't mean you'll get away."

"I'm not dyin' today," Carey said slowly and firmly. "I've got too many things that need attendin' before I cash in."

Jillson scowled. "Boys," he called, "close in and work this galoot over some. Bust him up a little. Then we'll let him have a head start against flyin' lead."

ONE of the men stalked up to Carey, gun inverted and raised for a slashing blow. He was within ten feet of the marshal, and Carey was tensed to leap and die fighting. That was the second when the distant spang of a rifle reached them, and the gunslick with the inverted pistol screamed and fell backward.

Carey spun around. So did the other three men. A puff of smoke appeared halfway up the ridge. The rifleman was lying prone, well-hidden by the grass and within good range of the gunslicks. His second bullet made a whining sound until it hit the side of the house, not more than a foot to the left of Jillson.

Whoever was behind the rifle certainly sided Carey. The marshal looked over his shoulder. Jillson had fled into the house, but was posted near a window with a six-gun in his hand. Carey gave a quick run up the porch steps, reached the wall between the door and the window, and put his back against it.

The six-gun was in his fist now. All three gunslicks had turned in the direction of the shooting and none saw Carey rush to this vantage point.

Now he shouted at them. "Drop your guns and elevate your hands, pronto."

They were trapped between two dangers and like most men of their breed, they gave up. Guns fell into the dust. Carey didn't move. Where he stood, Jillson had no chance of getting him. If he came out the door or crashed the window, Carey would get in the first shot and Jillson knew it.

Carey said, "All three of you—start walkin' straight toward the hills. If you got any ideas of runnin', forget them because my friend with the rifle will cut you down before you walk ten steps."

They obeyed meekly enough. Carey raised his voice. "Jillson," he called. "Jillson—you got two minutes to come out and start shootin'. After that I'll come in after you. Make up your mind."

There was a clatter of hoofs from behind the house. Carey swore softly when he saw Jillson riding hard in the opposite direction. He'd figured his man wrong. Jillson, he'd been sure, would have fought it out instead of escaping through the back door.

On the ridge, Carey saw his anonymous friend go after a big bay he'd apparently hitched behind a thicket. The man swung into the saddle and went after Carey's horse. Leading it, he rode down to the ranch. Carey went forward to meet him.

The stranger was a man of medium height, slim and tough as only the range can toughen a man. He had cold blue eyes and his mouth looked as if he'd never learned how to smile.

Carey extended his hand. "I'm mighty grateful to you," he said. "And don't worry none about this hombre you plugged. I'm Marshal Carey and you killed him to save my life."

"Reckon I did at that," the stranger said. "Saw these men ride up and go into the ranch house. Heard some shootin'. Then one of 'em came out and shot the dog. When he propped the dead animal up, I figgered it was to make somebody think things were quiet on the ranch. Then you came ridin' up and I guessed you was the waddy they intended to salivate."

Carey said nothing for a moment. He was too busy studying the pair of guns this man wore. The right gun was a black-handled regulation .38. An efficient gun with no outstanding characteristics. The other weapon was just the opposite. Big enough to be a .44, its silver handle stuck high out of its holster. This was a heavy, unwieldy weapon made heavier by the silver handle. It was hardly the type of gun on which to stake a life, but the stranger wore it as if he'd used it often.

"LIKE my gun?" The stranger grinned this time. In smiling, he looked younger and less stern. "Reckon it ain't the first silver-handled Colt you seen."

"Lon McKean had a gun like that," Carey said slowly. "Lon ran a ranch just like this one. Six months ago he lit out and never came back."

"Are you sayin' maybe I took this here gun away from him, marshal?"

"No, I ain't. I'm only sayin' he wore one like that. But I'll listen if you want to tell me anythin'."

"My name is Chet McKean," the stranger said slowly. "I came to take over my brother's ranch—if there's anythin' left to take over."

Carey nodded. "So that's it. Sure, the ranch is still there. Nothin' much else though. Some cattle Lon had sent C.O.D. are up for sale. Lon wasn't here to claim them. Better come into town with me first You can get the details there."

"Don't mind," McKean said. "Like to get acquainted some."

Carey faced him squarely. "Look here, Chet, you're thinkin' your brother was drygulched and his body hidden someplace. You're here to kill anyone who could have done it. The ranch ain't worth comin' after. It's a killin' mission you're on and as marshal of Buzzards Gap I got to tell you that killin' is for the law."

Chet McKean's eyebrows raised. "Now who said anythin' about killin'? Reckon if I did gun the jigger who ran my brother off and maybe killed him, nobody would do much about it. Only I ain't sure who did it and if I gun down a man who didn't, then I'm a murderer too. Ain't that what you're tryin' to tell me, marshal?"

"Just about," Carey replied. "You find out who drove him off and let me take care of him."

"Just supposin'," Chet McKean smiled, "I corral the jasper who done it and draw on him. What happens?"

"If you draw first and he kills you, he goes free. If you draw first and kill him—maybe you'll hang, maybe not. But you'll wind up in prison, McKean. That ain't a threat. It's a promise."

McKean nodded. "Reckon all I heard about you is true. They say, up in the Panhandle, you bend backward to do the right thing. If I draw on anybody first, marshal, I'll help you fix the rope around my neck."

Inside the house they found Anson Ring dead, shot through the head. They were silent for a while. Then they talked of other things, mostly the missing Lon McKean. Carey told him that Mary Proctor might know something. She and Lon had intended to marry. He also related how Cliff Keeler hated small-time ranchers and did his best to buy them out or, failing that, drive them off.

"The way they killed Anson Ring?" McKean asked.

Carey shook his head wearily, "Way they do it, McKean, ain't much I can act on. First one of Keeler's gunswifts gets into an argument with the rancher they want out. If he won't go, then this gunslick shoots him and says the rancher drew first. There's never any witnesses. You can't hang a man when nobody disputes his word."

"I wouldn't call what happened to Anson Ring very clever," McKean said.

"They planned it to be," Carey said. "They killed Anson and then rigged it for me to come ridin' up.

They were goin' to ventilate me too. Can't rightly figger who was more important dead. Me or Anson. But they'll hit the owlhoot trail now. Hard to catch them."

"You must be ridin' 'em hard," McKean observed.

"I warned them that the next killin', no matter who draws first, the winner will have to shoot it out with me."

"They also said you had guts," McKean commented dryly. "That was no lie either."

CHAPTER II

Hot-Lead Expert

IN TOWN, Marshal Carey watched Chet McKean walk slowly down the middle of the street, that silver-handled gun sticking high above his waist. Carey went into his office, routed out a dozing deputy and had him assemble a four-man posse to ride to Anson Ring's ranch, bury him and the bandit, and try to read sign pointing to the direction taken by the killers. Then Carey sat down to do some thinking.

He'd been about convinced all along that Lon McKean was dead. That Keeler's men had murdered him and hidden the body. Now Carey wasn't so sure that the body was still concealed. Chet McKean was wearing the dead man's gun.

As Carey remembered Lon, there was little resemblance between him and this lanky man who claimed to be Chet McKean. Yet Carey owed this stranger a great deal. If he hadn't come along, it was more than possible that the burying party, on its way to Anson Ring's ranch, would have had a marshal's grave to open.

Carey buckled on his six-gun, walked down the street and headed for the Big Sid saloon and gambling house. If Chet McKean was looking for a murderer, he'd go to Big Sid's place.

Carey pushed open the batwings and his hand darted for his gun butt and froze there. Chet McKean, standing side by side with a noted gunslick, was racing the man to the draw. McKean beat him every time. It was no shooting match, just a test of skill and speed.

The gunslick's admiration was mixed with resentment. He pointed to McKean's second gun, the silver-handled .44.

"You wear two guns and you only draw the black one. Maybe you got a stiff left hand."

McKean grinned. "You want to find out? I'll switch guns and bet you twenty dollars I can draw and shoot out the lamp at the end of the bar faster'n you."

"Why switch guns?" the man asked.

McKean patted the silver butt. "I don't mind tellin' you that this here is a mighty partic'lar gun. It's loaded with six mighty partic'lar bullets. When I draw that gun you'll hear about it because somebody is goin' to die."

The gunman shifted his feet uneasily. "I ain't got that kind of money to bet."

"I'll side you, Ernie," a harsh, jeering voice called out.

McKean turned to look at the speaker. He saw a burly, thick-necked man with a fiery red face standing spread-legged in the middle of the café floor. He wore a gun high, like a man who didn't know how to use it, couldn't be taunted into using it or had some support from men handier with weapons.

"For twenty dollars?" McKean asked.

The red-faced man swaggered to the bar and counted out twenty dollars from the contents of his pocket. McKean nodded, took out his own money and covered the other man's.

"Reckon it's only right for two bettin' me to know each other," McKean said. "Name is Chet McKean."

"I'm Cliff Keeler. Been watchin' you, McKean. Ernie's a good man

with a gun. You looked better, but if you think you can beat Ernie left-handed, I'm not against bettin' you can't."

McKean said, "We'll see."

HE WALKED down the length of the bar. The place was crowded and everyone scampered out of the way so both men had a direct aim at the lamp near the end of the bar. A huge man, tall, corpulent and bald-headed, came out of a room off the bar to watch.

Keeler never took his eyes off McKean. The brother of the missing rancher lined up beside Ernie. He pulled both guns, then jammed the silver-handled weapon into his right holster, the black .38 into his left. He and Ernie were poised, waiting the bartender's signal. It came. Ernie beat McKean by a scant fraction of a second.

McKean was changing his guns back as he walked up to Keeler waiting at the bar. McKean said, "You won twenty dollars, Keeler. Fair and square. Guess my left hand has been slippin' a bit."

"It ain't that," Keeler derided. "You got an edge on Ernie but not that much. He's mighty fast. Losing that match only shows there's a few who can shoot like you, McKean. Have a drink." He raised his voice. "Everybody step up and drink. On me. On McKean's money."

The enormous man shouldered his way through the crowd until he was beside McKean. He offered a fat, hard hand. "Proud to have you here, McKean," he said. "I'm Big Sid. This is my place and you're welcome any time."

Keeler laughed. "Big Sid always likes men who can put on a show and draw people in here."

Big Sid paid no attention to Keeler. He said, "Mind lettin' me have a look-see at that silver gun you carry, McKean? I got a big interest in fancy guns and that there is one of the fanciest."

"Sorry," McKean shook his head. "I told other people this too. When I pull that gun somethin' is about to happen. Sure, I switched it for some target practice, but from here on the gun stays where she is. Undrawed, until the time when it jumps and shoots."

Big Sid turned away. McKean saw Marshal Carey across the room and made his way to his side.

"You're not drinkin' marshal. It's on Keeler, but the money used to be mine. Step up."

"No, thanks," Carey said. "Liquor don't make a man's gun-hand any steadier and I got an idea mine better be mighty steady. You're runnin' in bad company, McKean. If anybody rode your brother off that ranch and maybe killed him, it's Cliff Keeler."

McKean nodded. "So he's the one who can't stand no small-time rancher. Reckon he's goin' to stand me on account of I'm runnin' Lon's place beginnin' tomorrow."

They walked out and turned up the street. Carey said, "It was interestin' when Keeler was willin' to bet all that money just to get a good look at your silver-handled gun. Or didn't you notice?"

McKean said, "There'll be one hombre who'll want the best look at it, marshal. And he's the one who will get it. He'll see it smokin'."

They heard running footsteps behind them and Carey looked around. Ernie, the gunslick who had vied with McKean for the honor of being the fastest on the draw, was hurrying after them. His face was a mask of rage.

"What's eatin' at your innards?" Carey asked him.

ERNIE came to a stop twenty feet away. He moved his feet apart and planted them firmly. He crouched slightly and hooked fingers darted for his gun. It happened so fast that neither Carey nor McKean could do anything about it.

Ernie said, "Marshal, stand aside.

McKean, pull that black gun slow-like and drop it on the ground."

"What's the idea?" McKean protested.

"Do like I say or I'll drill you where you stand. When your black gun lands on the dirt, I'll holster my gun. Then we go for 'em. You bragged so much how good you were with your left hand and that silver-handled gun, I'm lettin' you prove it and this time not by shootin' at a lamp."

"Who put you up to this?" Carey demanded.

Ernie said, "Marshal, I'm askin' you real nice to drop your gunbelt. Drop it!"

Carey wet his lips. There was murder in this gunslick's eyes. He unbuckled the belt and let it fall at his feet. When Ernie turned his gaze toward McKean, Carey slid his toe beneath the belt and maneuvered it so that he had the holster raised and with one quick dip he could wrench the gun free.

McKean didn't make a move. "Tell me who put you up to this, Ernie, and I'll oblige you, but not before. Tell me why you got to try and kill me."

"You made me lose my job. I was ridin' for Keeler and I was paid as his fastest gunslick. You showed me up and Keeler laughed at me and fired me. You beat me only because I'd been drinkin', but that's all wore off now. We'll try again, this time for keeps."

McKean slowly drew the black gun and threw it to one side. Ernie promptly holstered his gun and got set. There was no signal, no sign, but each man reached at the same instant. Carey's knees bent double and he dipped down toward the ground fast. At the same moment he raised the gunbelt with his foot and met it on the way up.

McKean was having trouble. The over-big silver-handled revolver was stuck in its holster. Not that McKean couldn't yank it free, but that precious second which spelled the difference between life and death was being used up.

Ernie howled in glee as he squeezed the trigger of his gun. McKean's heavy pistol was barely clearing leather as the professional killer told himself another notch on his gunbelt was assured.

Marshal Carey shot him through the head. Another wound wouldn't have killed fast enough, paralyzed that tightening trigger finger before it sent a chunk of lead whistling at McKean.

Ernie stood there for a moment. The gun was still level, but the trigger finger was already dead. He started to sway. The gun-hand sagged and the Colt dropped from his fingers. Then his knees gave way and he started down.

MCKEAN, the silver pistol slanted down, said nothing for a moment. Then he slowly holstered the gun. "Reckon he had that comin', marshal. But I wonder why he tried to kill me."

Carey was buckling his gunbelt back on. "What you'd better do," he said coldly, "is grease that holster of yours. But even more than that, I just got me an idea you'd do better for yourself somewhere else, McKean."

"Meanin' just what?" McKean grinned tightly.

"Ever since you arrived — and that's only a few hours—there's been trouble brewin' or bein' pulled off like now. You're shoutin' out loud for trouble and Buzzards Gap is plenty full of it."

"I can handle any trouble that comes," McKean vowed grimly.

"You sure didn't show it just now." Carey walked over where Ernie lay in a crumpled heap. He made certain he was dead. From Big Sid's place, men were running toward the scene. The shooting had attracted everyone abroad and the crowd was hurrying, now that they were certain the shooting was over.

Before they arrived, Carey stepped

up to McKean. "You saved my life at Anson Ring's place and I'm grateful. But I sort of evened things up tonight. Now I'm tellin' you, as a man who ain't under any obligation, to ride out of here pronto. If you get into any more trouble and you happen to live—which I doubt—then I'm lockin' you up."

McKean nodded. "You might say I been told, marshal, but as long as I behave there ain't no law can make me move. I'm goin' to Lon's ranch and take it over as his legal heir."

Carey nodded. "Start ridin', McKean. Some of these people liked Ernie. Why, I don't know. But there are them that admire a fast man with a gun. They might not like it, seein' you're alive. Even if it was me that done the killin'."

McKean recognized the wisdom of that and strode away. Before Carey was through telling the crowd about the shooting, McKean was riding hard out of town.

The marshal told the crowd what had happened. His voice was stern as he related how Ernie had demanded the fight and would have killed McKean in cold blood.

"He made McKean drop his black gun and go for the left-hand silver weapon," he said. "McKean is fast with his right hand, but not so fast with his left and that heavy silver gun ain't the kind that draws easy. I killed Ernie because, like I always said, if there's got to be killin' the law will do it, not anybody who feels like pumpin' lead."

No one argued with him. He was too good a marshal for that. Carey arranged to have the dead gunslick removed and buried. Then he went to his office and spent most of the night trying to figure out why McKean was doing all this. Carey was more than half certain that McKean could have drawn that silver gun, that he knew he'd be sided and pretended that the gun was stuck.

Maybe McKean was the type of man who wanted no one under an obligation to him, and therefore had taken advantage of Ernie's belligerent threats to let the marshal draw and shoot and so even up his debt to McKean.

Carey wagged his head, leaned back in the chair, and tilted his hat down over his eyes. In a few moments he was asleep.

CHAPTER III

Showdown Time

TWO days later Marshal Carey knew that Chet McKean wasn't lying when he maintained he came to take over his missing brother's ranch. McKean had paid the trail charges on the herd Lon had purchased, ridden the cattle to the ranch, and hired four men to work for him. He cleaned the place up, rebuilt the sagging bunkhouse, set up a new corral. The ranch was a going business twenty-four hours after McKean took it over.

Marshal Carey had no argument with that. McKean came to town each of those two days and spent most of his time at Big Sid's Saloon. Carey was girded for trouble, but none came. McKean seemed to have plenty of money and didn't mind spending it. Carey even got the idea that McKean was trying to buy himself a place in the social life of Buzzards Gap.

Big Sid, the enormous owner of the saloon, was sure of it. "Never did see a man so free with his money. He'd sent some of it to poor Lon, maybe the boy wouldn't have rode off and disappeared."

"Lon didn't ride off," Carey said grimly. "He was murdered and his body cached away someplace. Chet McKean found it, somehow. Else how'd he come by that silver gun which Lon used to wear?"

"Is it Lon's gun?" Big Sid asked quickly. "Sure looked like it, but I was too far away—"

"If it ain't Lon's silver Colt, then two of 'em must have been made in

the same mold. Even the engravin' is the same. Way I figger it, Chet McKean found his brother's body, took the silver gun off it, and is wearin' that gun until he meets the murderer. Then he's settin' to draw and shoot."

"I'm beginnin' to believe you're right, marshal." Big Sid's two hundred pounds of fat quivered. "Sure hope that shootin' match don't come off in my place. Too much killin' is bad for business."

Carey poured himself a light drink out of Big Sid's special bottle, raised the glass and watched the light shine through the amber fluid.

"Somebody," he opined, "is goin' to die when McKean pulls that silver gun. Whoever he is, that hombre must be some worried about now. Who do you think drygulched Lon McKean?"

"Why are you askin' me?" Big Sid helped himself to a generous serving of whisky. "Way I see it, Ernie tried to kill McKean for no special reason. Ernie even won that shootin' match so why should he be sore?"

"Ernie told us Cliff Keeler fired him for being slow on the draw and blamed it on McKean," Carey explained.

"I was there that night if you remember, marshal. If Keeler gave Ernie any orders I didn't see him do it."

Carey smiled a bit. "We think alike, Sid. There was nothin' said to make you think I suspected Keeler of drivin' off or killin' Lon McKean, but you talked as if you thought that too."

Big Sid shrugged his enormous shoulders. "What's the use of denyin' what everyone knows? Keeler hates small ranchers and drives 'em off when he can't buy 'em. Do you reckon anybody in town don't think Keeler did it?"

Carey arose, the drink untouched. "Keeler spends his evenin's in your place and that's where McKean will come when it's showdown time. So that's where I'll be spendin' my time too. Like I said before—any killin' to be done, the law does it."

Big Sid smiled expansively. "You not only say it, marshal, you put on a right convincin' demonstration."

THAT night Marshal Carey expected trouble and prepared for it. He spent the late afternoon cleaning and oiling his six-gun, arranging for men to be posted around the town so that no killer could ride away. He greased his holster until it was smooth as velvet and practiced drawing until his arm became tired.

He was on edge, nervous as a heifer bawling for her calf. When a shadowy figure moved out of the darkness on the wide porch of Big Sid's place, Marshal Carey instantly hit leather. Then he relaxed and let go of the gun.

The girl came toward him hesitantly, frightened by his aggressive move. She was about twenty, sturdy, clear-eyed and pretty. She usually wore levis and chaps, like a man, for she rode the range like any waddy. But now Mary Proctor wore an ankle-length skirt of gingham, a dinky hat atop braided, straw-colored hair and she was demure and shy.

"Marshal," she said hesitantly, "I didn't mean to frighten you."

He stared down at her from a distance of eighteen inches above her upturned eyes. "What in tarnation are you doin' in town at this time of night?" he demanded.

"I had to see you," she said. "Marshal, it's about this—this Chet McKean."

Carey's eyes narrowed. "What about McKean?" he asked.

"I'm afraid of him. I have to talk to you. Not here. He may be coming soon and I don't want him to see me. Let's go inside."

Carey jerked his chin at the batwing doors of the saloon. "That ain't much of a place to take a lady, even if she's scared of someone. But if you want that—"

She gripped his forearm tightly and her face was imploring. "I do,

marshal. He—he may kill me. The man is crazy. He put me off the ranch . . ."

"Come on," Carey said and piloted her into the place. He took Mary Proctor to a booth draped in red velvet curtains that could be drawn for privacy.

Mary really looked scared, here in the ample lamplight. She said, "You know Lon McKean and I were to be married. I had a lot of things at his ranch house. Furniture and dishes and curtains. We were fixing it up for when I'd move in with him. I went to the ranch when I heard Chet McKean was there. He pointed a gun at me."

"You can't blame him for that," Carey grunted. "Near did the same thing myself just now when you popped out of the dark. McKean has enemies."

"He didn't have to carry me out of the house and throw me across my horse. Then use a quirt on him so he rode off and nearly killed me."

She began to cry in a loud wailing voice. All conversation at the long bar ceased. Cliff Keeler was there with a pair of his gunslicks. Big Sid was waddling across the floor to find out why the sobs. And Marshal Carey saw someone else who interested him greatly. Bert Jillson had come in after a quick look around. The outlaw and murderer of Anson Ring walked briskly to the far end of the bar, took up a position there and used only his left hand to pour and raise his glass. The right stayed close by his gun butt.

MARY was standing now, dabbing at her eyes and talking in a loud voice that could be heard all over the saloon. "You don't know Chet McKean. Lon used to tell me about him. He's a born killer. He wore a law star until people realized he was using it as an excuse to kill men. He likes to kill. Lon was afraid of him, hoped he'd never come here."

"Hush up," Carey implored. "Mary, you're tellin' this to everybody in the place."

"I don't care," she shouted. "He came here to kill someone too. I know he did because he told me so. He said he had no time for—for women until his job was finished. He said he was going to ranch Lon's place and whoever tried to stop him would die."

Carey stood up and grasped her elbow. His face was crimson. "Mary, we'll finish this talk at my office. Never should have brought you here in the first place."

"I'm not going." She pulled herself free of Carey and eluded his attempt to seize her again. She darted out of the booth to the middle of the floor.

"You're siding him, marshal. Because he saved your life at Anson Ring's place. You won't arrest him no matter what he does—and if it's a killing, you'll see that he goes free. He boasts about that. He said he had the lawman of Buzzards Gap in his pocket. He was right. You won't do anything no matter what Chet McKean intends to do to me or anyone else."

Carey's jaws snapped tight. "This is no place to argue, Mary. You're comin' to my office and now."

Cary started for her and then stopped, frozen in his tracks. She saw the grimness that settled along his face and Mary turned slowly. Chet McKean, lanky, sour-looking and gimlet-eyed, stood with one arm draped over the top of a batwing.

He stood there for a moment, as if enjoying the scene. Then he strolled slowly across the wide expanse of floor space, straight up to the bar and dropped a hand to his gun with the black butt. He drew it slowly, placed it on the bar and spun it.

"I'd be obliged if you take care of this for me," he told the barkeep. "Mighty nice gun. Handles real well, but tonight I got use for only one gun. The one with the silver handle."

He put his back against the bar, raised elbows to rest on the edge also

and calmly surveyed the crowd. He saw Bert Jillson, who was trying to blend with the corner shadows as much as possible. McKean's eyes flashed fire. He gazed long and earnestly at Cliff Keeler, who seemed to be more at ease than anyone else in the place.

Suddenly the quiet was broken by a shriek from Mary Proctor. "He's going to kill someone. I told you he was a killer. That's why he came here tonight. There's murder in his blood." She broke away from Carey's grasp again and ran for the doors. He didn't try to stop her. He just breathed a low sigh of relief. If any gunplay developed, Mary would only be a burden on him.

Carey walked slowly toward McKean. "You heard the lady," he said in a calm voice. "Reckon she knew what she was talkin' about, McKean."

McKean smiled. "Marshal, I'd hate to ventilate that pretty vest of yours. If killin' business brought me here, there'll be killin' and not the legal kind you keep talkin' about."

"McKean," Carey said sowly, "I'm arrestin' you. By mornin' you'll know I'm right. The time has gone when killin' becomes the only answer to a man's troubles. I'm marshal here and I aim to act like a marshal."

"Don't come any closer," McKean warned. "You'll be a dead marshal. I'm askin' time to explain, that's all. To make you see—you and everybody else here—why I got to do my killin' and the law can't do it for me."

"Go ahead and talk," Carey said.

A GHOST of a smile flicked across McKean's face. "I'm thankin' you for that, marshal. I'm Lon McKean's brother. All of you know that. Three months ago Lon ordered two hundred head of cattle sent here. He spent money on his ranch until he didn't have any more. He intended marryin' Mary Proctor. Then he disappeared. Accordin' to the way it's told, he just rode off. Does a man with a fresh herd, a new ranch and a marryin' comin' up, ride off? Lon was drygulched."

"Can you prove that?" Carey asked.

"Would I be here if I couldn't, marshal? Mary Proctor was tellin' you I sent her packin' from the ranch. I sure enough did. Can't stand nosy women, 'specially when I'm searchin' for some money and a letter that Lon hid on the ranch. He wrote me to come if anythin' happened to him. Well—I found what I wanted."

Carey said, "McKean, you're dutybound to tell me who Lon named as his killer. Then we got to find Lon's body. You can't hang a man for murder unless there's a corpse. That's the law."

"The law," McKean spat on the floor, "is for jaspers who don't have the guts to do their own avengin'. Maybe I know where Lon's body is. Maybe when I found it, was when I made up my mind that I do my own huntin' and hangin'. That's why I been packin' this silver-handled Colt. I said when I drew it, somebody would die. That somebody is the man who murdered my brother."

Carey moved another step toward McKean. The lawman's eyes flicked from side to side, watching everyone, looking for any gunplay and hoping to stop it in time.

McKean's voice became a rasp. "One more step, marshal, and you better start drawin'. This is my night to square things for Lon and there ain't nobody can stop me."

Carey moistened his lips. "You'll hang for it, McKean," he warned.

"It'll be me who the rope chokes," McKean grunted. "Let me do the worryin'."

He turned toward the further end of the bar. Cliff Keeler suddenly straightened up. His hand came away from the whisky glass and the fingers moved slightly, in a signal.

Bert Jillson came around the end of the bar with his gun bearing down. As when Ernie had drawn on him, McKean seemed to have trouble get-

ting that heavy gun out of its holster.

Carey saw this as it began. His right hand moved with a blur of speed. He whipped out his six-gun.

"Jillson," he shouted, "you're wanted for murderin' Anson Ring!"

The gunslick, confused by Carey's voice, looked away from McKean and then swung his gun in line with the marshal. McKean seemed to leave the floor in a dive for the man. Jillson's gun exploded, but the bullet ripped into the ceiling. Then he came down with a crash and McKean swarmed over him. His fists lashed at the gunslick's face, cut it into a bloody mass, and then Carey took over.

McKean was breathing hard. "That was for lettin' me talk, marshal. Seems like we're always doin' each other favors. I'm askin' one more. Don't stop me now."

He wheeled and started toward Cliff Keeler again. The cattleman was gray of face. He held his right hand above his gun butt. There was indecision on his face.

Bert Jillson groaned and tried to get up. Carey slugged him with the butt of his six-gun and looked up again to watch the play.

Keeler said, "McKean, you're makin' a mistake. I didn't kill Lon. Sure, I told him I would if he didn't pack up and git. But that was all I did—just warn him."

MCKEAN spoke in a voice as cold as zero weather air. "I'm drawin', Keeler. This silver-handled gun salivates the jigger who killed Lon. Maybe it's you, maybe it ain't—"

"Chet—look out!"

It was Mary's scream, from the door. McKean spun around. Big Sid, despite all his weight, had scooped a six-gun from his belt with amazing speed. He was squeezing the trigger when Carey fired a single shot. It hit Big Sid's gun-hand, smashing the fingers and knocking the gun to the floor.

Carey said, "McKean—that's your man, not Keeler. Big Sid killed Lon. I had it figgered some time ago, but there wasn't any proof. Lon ordered a lot of cattle and agreed to pay for them C.O.D. But he didn't have any money when they got here. He expected to have some. I'm thinkin' he won it off Big Sid. They were always gamblin'. Big Sid lost so much he could only pay off in bullets."

The silver gun flashed. Big Sid, nursing his bloody hand, let out a shrill scream. "Carey, you're the law. Don't let him kill me. That's Lon's gun. He knows I killed Lon. I was afraid Lon left some kind of a note. I—I had to kill him. He's buried up in Long Handle Canyon. McKean knows that. He got Lon's silver gun."

Jim Carey yelled, "McKean, don't shoot!"

McKean's big silver-handled gun sagged and then dropped from his hand. He turned and called Mary's name. She came to him at once.

McKean said, "I don't want to kill anyone. I hate killin', even when I have to do it like when I stopped Jillson from killin' Marshal Carey. This ain't Lon's gun. It's the twin of it. My father bought two of 'em and when he died, Lon and me we each took one. I had to make the killer think I was tough and a salivatin' gent. And at the same time make him think I was a mite slow on drawin' that silver gun. I had to make him think that when I did draw it, I was about to shoot my brother's murderer. I figgered that would make the killer draw and show who he was."

Carey said, "You built yourself up good, McKean, and Mary Proctor sure helped. You were gunnin' for Keeler because he was the most likely, but you were wrong. That's why no man should take the law into his own hands. If you shot him, I'd have had to hang you."

"I was sure it must be Keeler," McKean groaned. "Especially when he started for his gun."

"Keeler was scared. So was Big Sid, but Sid liked to shoot people in the

back. I'm thinkin' it was Big Sid who sent Ernie to kill you that night. You scared him right then. Ernie always did do odd jobs for Big Sid, like highjackin' anybody who won too much at Sid's gambling tables. That's what happened to Lon.

"He won the money and knowin' Big Sid would have to make good, he went ahead and ordered them cattle sent C.O.D. and arranged to marry Mary. Lon had no money to keep the ranch goin' and when he ordered them cattle I knew he expected some. He couldn't borrow any so the only way he could get it was by stealin' or winnin' heavy."

"Jillson must have worked for him too," McKean said slowly.

"No," Carey said. "I saw Keeler signal him and it was Keeler who wanted me dead."

"You can't prove that!" Keeler shouted.

"Reckon I can't, but if you don't pull stakes mighty soon, I'm withdrawin' that warnin' to hang anybody who shoots a man. And talkin' of hangin', we got two of 'em now. Jillson, for killin' Anson Ring and Big Sid for killin' Lon. Sure got to find me a special rope for Big Sid."

McKean said, "Marshal, thanks for what you done. I was a fool to think I could bluff the murderer into revealin' himself. But that was the only way I knew how to settle Lon's affairs."

"You made Big Sid draw," Carey said. "And confess too. Are you intendin' to stay around these parts, McKean?"

The lanky waddy looked down at Mary Proctor and smiled. "Reckon there's a lot to Buzzards Gap I'll like, marshal. I'm stayin' and runnin' Lon's little ranch the way he'd want me to do."

Hell-Bent for Election

By C. Wm. Chamberlain

Some amusing incidents about two miners who took a brief flurry in the politics of old-time California.

IF "SHORTY" WYNN and "Step-and-a-Half" Arn hadn't taken the wrong boat to Sacramento, when Pete Nicolas killed John Parrott, and something hadn't happened to their petition, the Mother Lode town of Columbia might have become the capital of California.

As a matter of fact, the little mining settlement was the capital for one day — but this is getting ahead of the story.

There were extenuating circumstances around the shooting of John Parrott. While Pete Nicolas had been legally tried, convicted and sentenced to be hanged, the boy had a lot of friends around the mining settlement.

In July, 1849, Columbia had three banks and ten bars, not to mention sixteen stores and miners' supply houses. Its rather unstable population consisted of more than a thousand gold miners, gamblers, freighters, business men and a goodly number of Indians, Orientals and other aliens. Pete Nicolas was no better than he should be, but he was no worse than a lot of Columbia's citizens. And he wasn't a killer who keeps track of his victims by carving their number in the handle of his gun.

It may be a bit difficult to explain how Shorty and Step-and-a-Half managed to get 5,000 signatures on the petition for Pete's pardon in a settlement the size of Columbia, but there they were in black and white.

If some of the names were taken from Boot Hill cemetery and if there were many hen-tracks, representing various and miscellaneous Chinese, Indians and Mexicans, there was no one to question the authenticity of the petition. It is strenuous work thinking up five thousand names without a telephone book. And there were no telephones a hundred years ago. Shorty and Step-and-a-Half sweat blood preparing that petition.

Finally, the rangy, spring-gaited Arn was satisfied. He tugged at his rusty, Niagara Falls whiskers and poked Shorty in the ribs with an angular elbow.

"Reckon it's time to start for Sacramento, ol'-timer; the stage is due."

"Don't go fer to rushin' me, Step-and-a-Half—I'm 'bout all ready. But I need a fresh supply of Burley. I'll git me a plug and we'll high-tail it fer the big city. I warrant the boat will be waitin' at Stockton fer the stage." He twisted his black, handlebar mustache and tucked the rolled petition in his warbag for safety.

THE two miners were at the boat landing in due time ready to sail for Sacramento, but the boat hadn't arrived. The day was hot and they decided to drop in at the Silver Dollar Saloon. It was handy to the pier so they couldn't miss the steamer. It was their business to save the life of their friend and the two hombres intended to fulfill their duty.

Two hours later, after drinking generously to the success of their journey, a long-drawn-out whistle announced the arrival of the packet on the river.

Fearing that there might be no bar on the steamer, they had two more quick ones and then made their way precariously to the landing. The boat was docked and deck hands were loading bales of freight. One of the crew saw the two miners heading unsteadily for the gangplank and offered to help them aboard.

"Never mind us," Step-and-a-Half hiccoughed. "Jest you hold the boat still, pardner, and we'll make it."

They finally did. But not until they had fallen off the pier and had been fished out by the crew. Fortunately the petition was safe and dry in the leather pouch, hooked to Shorty's belt.

The packet was well on its way to San Francisco before the two inebriates discovered they had taken the wrong boat. They gazed at each other in dismay. What to do? Time was short and the rope was awaiting Pete Nicolas.

The miners tried to explain the matter to the captain but—no soap. He figured it was just another couple of drunks trying to make sport of him and he refused to turn back. Anyway, he wasn't taking chances of losing his mail contract for some stranger's neck.

In San Francisco, Shorty and Step-and-a-Half became resigned to their friend's fate. To drown their sorrows they went down the Barbary Coast and partook of various and sundry libations. There was nothing they could do now about the hanging of Pete Nicolas. It was just one of those things.

Leaning on the bar at the Forty-Niner Saloon, Shorty remembered the petition with five thousand signers. There was something! Too bad they couldn't use it for some other purpose. Opening his warbag, the undersized miner pulled out the huge roll of paper and laid it on the mahogany. Sadly, he scanned the many names and reasonable facsimiles thereof.

"What's that?" the sociable bartender asked. "Another petition to make San Francisco the State capital?"

Shorty looked at Step-and-a-Half and the lanky miner gazed back at his pardner. The idea struck them both at the same time. With his belt knife, Shorty separated the names from the text of the petition.

"Gimme a sheet of paper!" he barked at the bartender. "This is a petition to make Columbia the capital of the State of Californy. Gimme pen and ink and some glue!"

For the next hour, the two miners were busily occupied in sorting out such phrases as "whereby" and "whereas," while they prepared a petition "respectfully urging and demanding" that the flourishing town of Columbia be placed on the ballot as a candidate for the location of the State capital at the next election.

This was one way to save face at home, even if they had failed to save Pete Nicolas's neck. The roll of signatures was duly dispatched to the State Legislature.

AFTER a round of drinks for the house, Shorty announced that when Columbia became the State capital, he intended to be Governor of California and Step-and-a-Half was to go to Washington as Senator.

Further, when he had achieved this authority, the State was going to take over all saloons and then drinks would be free to everybody. The en-

thusiasm expressed by his audience, indicating that such a step would be most popular, led the suddenly inspired statesman to add other equally approved legislative changes.

There would be at least two holidays in each week throughout the year. All old men, past forty, were to be placed on pensions; miners and prospectors were to have access to grubstakes at any time; the Chinese were all to be deported and jails were to be abolished.

It was a platform to assure election almost any place in the State in '49, but somehow it all was forgotten the next day. Shorty or his pardner couldn't seem to recall what really had taken place after the petition had been dispatched.

An unconfirmed rumor has it that an enterprising citizen from Sacramento was present and saw to it that the petition never was sped on its way. Step-and-a-Half swore that Shorty took care of the matter. But then he was in much the same unreliable condition as his pardner and his affidavit was none too impressive. However, their report was accepted in Columbia and the citizens of that infant metropolis went back to work to await the outcome.

Shorty and Step-and-a-Half returned to their mine and the event was all but forgotten by their potential constituents. The two miners' brief flurry in the politics of California passed into limbo and, except when they joined other thirsty Columbians on a Saturday night for rugged recreation, seldom was discussed.

Step-and-a-Half went back East for a visit and never was heard from again. Shorty hung around until the mine petered out and then high-tailed it to new diggings.

The question of the permanent site for the capital was on the ballot in the 1850 general election.

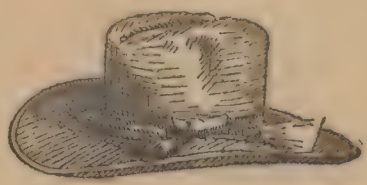
Sacramento, Vallejo, San Diego, San José, and Monterey were all printed on the ballot. Penciled names of San Francisco, Benicia, Nevada City, Santa Cruz, Gilroy, Stockton, Yuba City, Hamilton, Downieville, and Eureka each drew a scattering number of votes. But the record of that date makes no mention of Columbia.

Maybe the town was too busy to care. Its mines produced gold to the amount of sixty-seven million dollars. Anyway, there is no official mention of Columbia's being in the race for the capital. That is, there wasn't until the Chamber of Commerce erected a stone memorial to the fact, with fitting ceremonies in 1929.

July, the fifteenth, each year is observed as the anniversary of the attempt of Shorty and Step-and-a-Half to save face at the expense of their friend's neck. As a matter of fact, Pete Nicolas was not hanged. A last-minute reprieve prevented the execution. He served seven years in prison for the killing and then disappeared from the pages of history.

Today, Columbia is the best preserved of all the Mother Lode mining towns in California. A movement is on foot to preserve its pristine, crude beauty as the restored "Williamsburg of the West Coast," as has been done with the colonial village in Virginia.

Columbia had its one day as capital of the State when Governor Earl Warren visited the town to sign the bill, making the site a part of the California park system.



Manhunt at Timberline

By Joseph Commings

Bagging the bear on that big game hunt had been tough on Chad Sawyer, but not nearly as tough as when his turn came to be the hunted.

THAT mid-October, Major Orson Gower and I went hunting grizzly bears in the Colorado Rockies. It took us four days before we finally stalked our first kill.

And then it came my turn to be the hunted.

It had snowed heavily the night be-

fore and that made tracking very easy. Around nine-thirty in the morning we sighted our quarry and circled the valley for an up-wind stalk. The grizzly, a female weighing about seven hundred pounds, was hungrily feeding on snow lilies and tamarack bark. Major Gower was by far the better shot. He smashed the bear's spine with a single brush-cutter bullet.

We approached the huge carcass cautiously, our big bore Krag rifles ready for any surprises. But the grizzly was dead. We prepared to field-dress it on the spot. I unslung the small pack I carried. It contained yards of rolled-up cheesecloth, a small rope, a box of black pepper, and four meat bags. Gower was using his large hunting knife to disembowel the dead animal.

Although I was no stranger to big game hunting, Gower was much more experienced than I was. He worked expertly while I gave him all the assistance I could. He used his belt-ax to chop into the bear's rib cage, leaving a bony cave. We didn't speak much. We knew what we had to do. We let the meat dry out somewhat, then sprinkled it with the black pepper and covered it with the cheesecloth to keep it from spoiling.

Gower washed the blood off his hands in a cold brook not very far away. "We'll let the head and cape go till tomorrow, Chad," he said to me. "Tonight we'll have bear meat on the table."

I selected the rump I thought we could use.

Gower came back toward me, drying his wet hands on the outside of his mittens. "Leave it," he said. "We don't want to be carting that along yet."

"Aren't we going back to camp?" I said.

"Not until we have a look around. This was a female. She may have had a mate in the vicinity. We might be able to bag another one before dark."

I doubted it. This wasn't the mating season for bears. But I left everything there, including the small pack with the field-dressing tools.

We put our snowshoes on again. The snow was deep enough in some places. I was proud of the snowshoes I had. Bear paws, with caribou-rawhide thongs.

Orson Gower lumbered ahead of me. He was in his forties, a good twenty years older than I was. He'd had a successful career in the army and his title of major was well-earned in the Indian wars. He was an experienced hunter. A large shambling man, with a silver-tipped mustache, there was a lot of steak on him. And he was the best friend that my family, the Sawyers, ever had.

He pointed ahead to a towering cliff. "We'll do some observing from up there."

Ideal, I thought. From that height we'd have a commanding view of this whole arenalike depression that we were in. We might be able to spot another bear with our binoculars.

REACHING the cliff's face, we found it jagged enough to enable us to climb it without too much difficulty. We both slung our rifles on our shoulders, then took our snowshoes off and strapped them on our backs. Gower picked up a lean, almost straight branch about eight feet long. It had a downthrust pothook on one end. Gower used it as a sort of alpenstock to aid him in his climb.

We kicked the rime off our Swiss boots and started up. I was careful to place my feet in the same crevices into which he'd thrust his cone-headed hobnails.

We were sweating and a little short of breath by the time we reached a narrow ledge twelve feet below the summit.

"Chad," he said, "you go up and glass. Here, let me have your rifle. No use weighing yourself down."

I unslung my rifle and handed it to him. I caught my breath, then made the final short climb to the top. My binoculars swung around my neck

on an old worn-thin leather strap. I caught them with one hand to stop them from swinging and perhaps losing them. I should have repaired that ragged strap before starting out.

At the top I stepped to the edge and looked down. Gower was immediately under me, staring at me. Below him was a sheer drop of eighty feet to a jumble of snow-covered boulders and stones. I planted my feet carefully and put the binoculars to my eyes. It was an excellent vantage point. I could see a great sweep of forest, barrens, snowpeaks. Far below, a cottontail rabbit fled in long frightened bounds.

I had no warning of the terrible danger that I was in. The first thing I felt was a sharp pressure at the back of my neck. It started to throw me off balance there on the very edge. Instinctively I swayed back.

Looking down between my angled arms, I saw in that frozen instant why my head had been lurched forward. As I had stood there with the binoculars to my eyes, Gower had reached up the long branch he was carrying and had hooked the spur at the end of it onto the binocular strap. Giving it a sharp downward yank, he could pull me clean over the edge. There was no way of getting out of the strap in time.

My arms pinwheeled as I leaned over empty space. I heard something snap and I fell over backward—safely on the rocky summit. I jerked my head up in time to see the binoculars go flying out through the air. The leather strap on them, worn thin, had snapped under the pressure.

I was drenched with a cold sweat as I rolled over and crawled to the edge of the cliff on my hands and knees. I was saying in an unsteady voice, "My God, Major, that was a hell of a joke!"

I peered down at him. He was looking straight up at me. As soon as my head appeared he started quickly to unsling one of the rifles. In his eyes was murder. I didn't stop to ask questions. I tumbled over backward again. A shot smashed upward into the cold still air. Fragments flew from the cliff edge.

In a fever of fright, I scrambled over rocks on the opposite side. I slipped and fell and toppled ten feet into a soft snowdrift. I crouched there panting for a moment. Gower was trying to kill me! We had been the best of friends up until that terrible moment! What was the matter with him? Had he gone mad?

It couldn't possibly be a joke. Only the worn binocular string had saved me from plunging to death. He'd fired that shot to panic me, because I'd been out of sight when he pulled the trigger. Gower never wasted any shots. I was a fool to think that I was safe any longer. But I had to try once more.

The quaver wobbled my voice as I called out, "Major! Major!"

He heard me, but he never answered. I never heard him say anything after that. He just hunted me.

I LOOKED hastily around. I was on a ridge and ahead of me across the snow was a dense thicket of blue spruce. I could gain some measure of safety in there. I was reacting almost by instinct. I could think about the reasons for all this later. Now I had to escape, to live.

I started to run through the snow and sank to my calves at every step. I couldn't get to the spruce in time, bogged down like this. I'd forgotten the snowshoes that were still strapped to my back. I wrenched them off and slipped my feet into them. I made a webfooted run for the long blue shadows.

As I foundered into the cover of the trees, I looked back. Gower had just appeared around the rocky summit. His eyes were on my snow trail. I couldn't take a step without letting him know where I'd gone. He wasn't in a hurry and he could follow me openly. He had both rifles. I was un-

armed, except for the hunting knife in my belt sheath.

I thrashed my way through the thick woods, the sweat frosting on my face. The sky was all a dull gray and in a few hours it would be dark. I came to the fringe of the trees and I'd have to make another dash for it across open space.

I shuffled on my snowshoes toward a bare, windswept outcropping of limestone. I *had* to make Gower lose my trail. Clambering on the rock, I kicked off the snowshoes and carried them under my arm. I ran, crouching, dodging, and slipping on ribbed ice. I was like the cottontail rabbit I'd seen only a short while before, bent on escape, fleeing from death.

I'd always wondered what feelings the hunted animal had. The only thought I had was to keep running, to put distance between myself and the man with the gun. Yet it seemed impossible that Gower wanted to kill me. Your own life seems so precious to you that you can't conceive of anyone wanting to take it away from you.

I was beginning to grow tired of running on snowshoes and dodging on rocks. I was almost tempted to stop and try to reason with Gower. But I remembered the look in his eyes and that memory wouldn't let me stop.

Snow underfoot again and I mushed through it. My hurried glances over my shoulder failed to reveal Gower. He must have lost my trail at the limestone and was trying to pick it up again. He could take his time. I couldn't get away.

The long, wooded ridge was beginning to slope off. I reached the crest of a steep slide that descended all the way to the valley. I stopped. The numbing fright was starting to lose its frigid grip on my brain. I was beginning to think again. I was beginning to feel that I could match wits with Gower.

One agonizing question pounded in my head. "*Why* does he want to kill me?" I thought. "Why? Why?"

The answer was beyond my grasp. I couldn't stand there pondering it. I had other things to do. The steep slope had given me an idea. I pulled off my mackinaw and spread it on the snow. I piled some loose, heavy rocks on it, then buttoned up the coat and tied the sleeves together to make a large bundle.

I dragged the rock-filled coat to the edge of the slide and sent it rolling and skidding down. It went clear to the bottom.

I waited, watching it. Once I turned with a rush, fright jumping inside me, thinking that I heard Gower coming up behind me. But it was only a white-tailed ptarmigan taking wing from a willow grove.

THEN I put my snowshoes on backward and plowed on, edging down toward the valley every several rods. The impression I wanted to leave for Gower was that someone else had met me at the top of the slide and that we'd gone down to the bottom together. It might make him hesitate if he thought someone else was with me. But I knew there was no chance that I'd ever meet anyone else.

I reached the foot of the descent and doubled back toward the slide, vigorously swinging my arms in my lumberjack shirt, keeping up a warming pace. I found my snow-plastered mackinaw, untied and unbuttoned it, then shook the stones out of it.

Putting the coat on again, I shied off across the valley, taking advantage of all the cover I could find. I climbed halfway up the opposite side and holed up, watching. My exertions were making the cold air cut as sharp as a razor in my lungs. Fatigue was sapping me. I leaned back wearily against the stout trunk of a Douglas fir.

After a while I saw Gower appear in the valley. He had a bruinlike appearance. The man that walked like a bear. He was snowshoeing along, almost carelessly, heading toward our camp. He looked neither left nor right, but I knew he wasn't following any trail. He would have made a per-

fect target—if I'd had a weapon. I doubted that my ruse had fooled him.

Perhaps he knew I was watching and this careless appearance was to throw me off my guard. Once out of sight again, he might try to circle me and come on me from the rear. Or maybe he was merely going to let the quarry rest for the night. He could easily pick up the trail in the morning.

I kept roving until it got dark. The prickly feeling I had in my back forced me to keep moving. I knew that he couldn't come jack-lighting after me in the dark, because I'd be able to see his lantern.

I huddled down in a punch-bowl gully, trying to get out of the frost-biting wind that blew from the snow-peaks. On the way I'd gathered a few things to eat. Watercress, crisp roots of Indian cucumber, and a handful of chestnuts. They'd relieve some of the pangs of hunger.

My hands and feet were icy. I needed a fire. But it would be dangerous to light one. I debated a long time before my creature comforts won out. I brushed away snow and dug a hole. Into it I put an old bird's nest, dry as tinder, that I'd found protected under a ledge. I got it lighted with a piece of quartz and my steel knife blade. Then I added one or two faggots. By squatting over the fire hole, I could thaw myself out.

The situation was grim. I couldn't strike out in the night and put a great distance between Gower and me, because there wasn't any place to go. There was no hope in pushing on toward the west. In that direction were more Rockies and a land full of hungry wild animals. Eagle Town, our jumping off place, was two days away by pack horse toward the east. The only way to reach it was by going through Alpine Pass, a very narrow bottleneck. And that's where Gower and I had made our camp.

Hemmed in by rugged mountains, I had only one way out—past the camp. And Gower was there waiting for me. There was no one else to help me. Quenemo, the Indian guide, had come with us from Eagle Town to take care of the pack horses. But Quenemo had taken the horses back over the two-day route again. We wouldn't see him for another week and a half. Gower would have hunted me down at his leisure by then.

How would he explain that to Quenemo and the rest of the people who knew me so well in Eagle Town? Easily. We'd had a hunting accident. Those things do happen. I'd unfortunately slipped over a cliff. If I had a bullet hole in me, I had shot myself with my own gun. Simple explanations.

AND everybody would believe Gower's story, because there was no reason to doubt it. Gower had known the Sawyers for years, they'd say. They were all good friends. Chad Sawyer had gone on a chummy bear-hunting trip with an amiable companion. Poor Chad had had an unfortunate accident. That was what made it seem so sinister. Nobody would believe otherwise. Even I, huddled over a pitiful fire in the fear-filled dark, could scarcely believe it.

Gower had become my father's friend fifteen years ago. Chad was my father's name too. The Sawyers hadn't done badly in Colorado. My father had helped to locate a silver mine and he had a quarter interest in it. When my father died seven years ago, Gower became a sort of Dutch uncle to me and also a guardian of legal rights. I was to get my quarter share of the mine's profits when I reached twenty-five. That would be six months from now. Gower was holding the shares for me till then.

"The shares," I said to myself. I could feel a grimace freeze on my face. Suppose Gower wanted to kill me so that I would never inherit those shares. It had always seemed to me that Gower had a mysterious source of income. He'd say laughingly that he had many irons in the fire. His interests paid off. I thought with a

shudder how much he liked cards and horse racing. And there was a flamboyant sort of woman in the next town. I'd seen Gower with her a couple of times.

These things had never had any sequence to me till I crouched over them in the cold night. Now they added up.

A thin dish of moon had come out. I straightened up stiffly, doused the fire with handfuls of snow, and then stamped around to restore my circulation. It must be nearly midnight. I wondered how long Gower would be staying awake.

I cautiously went down into the moonlit valley and approached the camp at Alpine Pass, my ears straining. I might take a desperate chance and try to run the gantlet of the high walls and Gower's big game gun.

As I came closer I saw that the rocky sides of the pass had a yellowish glow. Our equipment had included two kerosene lamps. One had been planted on each side of the pass, lighting it up well enough to make a target of anything that went through it. Gower also had a huge fire blazing on the side opposite the tent. A chipmunk couldn't go through there without being spotted. The lean-to tent itself was in the shadows.

There was no movement. I didn't know whether Gower was awake or asleep. I wasn't going to risk my life trying to find out. I backed up into my mountainous trap again. He would keep me sewed up at night and stalk me by day. He didn't have all the time in the world either. He had to finish it before Quenemo came back in a week and a half.

Trembling for fear that my nearness might arouse him and cause him to rush after me, I mushed along the valley toward where we'd killed the bear. My constant snowshoe trekking was making my legs rubbery. A hunger was gnawing into me. I had to have solid, strength-giving food. There was the grizzly meat.

Low shadowy shapes slunk away before me as I approached. Starving coyotes. They hadn't touched the meat because the man-scent kept them away.

I CUT off a portion of the meat and took it with me to my gully on the hillside. I made another buried fire, scorched the meat over it, and bolted it down. The brown juice ran through my fingers. But I felt better as I leaned back against a tangled brush blowdown, my stomach full. After trying unsuccessfully to keep my eyes open, I dozed off.

I gave a start when I saw Gower grinning evilly at me, his face only three yards away. I wasn't able to move. He lifted the rifle he had in his mittened hands. The barrel of it was eight feet long. When he aimed it at me the muzzle came within a foot of my face. I struggled to get up, but I was frozen to the spot. My mackinaw was weighed down with a ton of loose stones. Gower had all the time in the world to aim. He had a week and a half.

I shouted at him, "Major! Major!"

He didn't speak a word. His lips never moved. But he did make sounds. He was crowing at me. "Caw, caw, caw!" It was a weird taunting laugh.

I flung my hands up as the gun went off in my face. I rolled over once on the snow, the cawing still rasping in my ears. My frayed nerves were jolting alarm messages to my benumbed brain. The world before my bleary eyes was all a dim gray.

There was a loud flapping of wings as a crowing whisky jack flew out of the yellow pine branches over my head. It was morning and I was alone, trying to sit up, trying to untangle reality from dreams. I remembered Gower. The reality was worse than the dream.

I started to get to my feet. Then I sagged as an agony shot through my lower legs. Pain twisted my muscles into knots from my insteps to my

knees. I doubled up on the snow and tried to rub the fierce torment out of my shins. What had happened to me overnight?

The snowshoes!

The snowshoes had crippled me. I had a case of what the French-Canadian voyageurs call *mal-de-racquette*. It's a whopping Charley horse in the legs from prolonged walking on snowshoes before the muscles are hardened up to the task. Yesterday was the first time I'd been on snowshoes all year. I'd over-exerted myself on them too suddenly. Now I was reduced to a crawl.

Sweat pearled across my brow when I remembered that some men with this condition are laid up for three or four days!

Cursing with fear, anger and pain, I tried to get up again. I found that I could stand if I supported myself. I had to walk. I had to get away from this gully. Gower would be tracking me here before long. I put the snowshoes on and seized a stick to act as a crutch. Every step I took made me wince. I'd never get far like this.

Crawling part of the way, I reached a spot that overlooked the valley. Gower would be coming and I wanted to spy on him. I lay there shivering and hungry, waiting.

At last Gower shuffled along from the camp. He took each snowshoe step smoothly and without exertion. He didn't have *mal-de-racquette*. His gun was slung on his beefy shoulder, ready for instant use. He headed to where we'd killed the bear.

I kept thinking of wild ways to turn the tables on him. I thought of making a bow and arrows or digging a mountain-lion pit in his path. But I knew I'd never get close enough to him with a hastily made bow and arrows. And digging the pit in this hard ground was out of the question.

"If I could only get that gun away from him," I muttered to myself, "I might be able to whittle him down to my size."

GOWER was examining the tracks around the field-dressed grizzly. He was reading the signs. He knew that I'd stopped there the night before to cut off some meat. I watched him as he slowly lifted his big head and scanned the rocks and timber around him. I lay flat in a scrub oak ticket, scarcely breathing.

He picked up the tracks that led to where I'd spent the night. It wouldn't be long before he was right on my back. I had to keep moving. Keep ahead of him. There was no chance that I could race him to Alpine Pass and get on the trail to Eagle Town. All I could do was creep. That would make it easy for him.

I pawed through the dry brown brush till I reached the rushing brook. I remembered that this was the same brook that Gower had washed his hands in yesterday after dressing the bear. The brook bubbled downhill noisily, clear and cold. I crawled toward it until the thin rim ice cracked brittlely under my mittens.

Pulling myself upright on my stick, I waded into the brook. The swift water sucked around my feet and I could feel the dampness start to seep through my oil-tanned leather boots. All that this might get me was wet feet. And pneumonia. But if I didn't hurry, I'd never live long enough to die of pneumonia.

It would slow Gower down in his tracking. He'd have to hunt all along the brook for my out-trail. It would give me time. Time.

I went downhill with the stream as fast as I could. I slipped on mossy stones, flopping into the water and wetting my arms up to my elbows. I was muscle-sore and miserable when I sloshed out at last and hobbled toward the bear carcass.

All the equipment was where we had left it yesterday. Gower had been too busy hunting me to do anything else. My eyes leaped from object to object: the rope, the box of black pepper, the huge gutted carcass covered with yards of cheesecloth.

I limped to the carcass and peeled the cheesecloth back. Gower had done a neat job of axing out the insides. The cave of ribs and spine had dried out nicely. It looked roomy enough. I'd heard about a plainsman who lived for three days inside a dead buffalo. I ought to be able to hide inside a dead bear. I shuddered with cold and wet and new fears. This was the last desperate chance. This was my only hope.

I javelined my stick away. I laid my snowshoes flat inside the carcass. I tried to remove all signs of my presence there. I prepared myself, then hunched inside the great stiff skin. There was room enough to lie back with my legs doubled up. I smoothed the cheesecloth out in front of the wide opening again. It was a wonderful, warm hiding place. The thing I dreaded most now was falling asleep.

I lay there listening. There were sounds—birds and small animals chattered and the brook gurgled. No sound of an approaching man.

Gower would want meat eventually, He was too intent on finding me to hunt any, I figured. He'd come back to the bear meat to cut off a supply for supper. He'd come.

HOURS dragged by. Then I felt a gooseflesh sensation all over as I heard the *crunch-crunch* of snowshoes on crusted snow. I could feel my hackles rise under my fur cap. I wriggled my toes, trying to get the blood to circulate in them again. The snowshoes kept clumping nearer to the carcass. This was the last moment.

I heard Gower puttering around while I waited in a frenzy of suspense. Then he came so close that I could hear his slightly labored breathing. He was muttering to himself. I saw his large shadow fall across the cheesecloth.

My backbone was rigid against the bear's immense spine. A mittened hand fumbled with one side of the cloth covering and ripped it aside. The instant Gower saw me coiled up in there, he stood frozen. All I needed was an instant. My own hands had been clenched tightly for so long that I was afraid I couldn't open them again. I flung my right hand up at his face.

I hurled the handful of black pepper right into his staring eyes!

He staggered back, blinded, cursing. I emptied the other handful at him. Then I came creaking out of the carcass as if I were a hundred years old. Gower was pawing at his face with one hand, trying to unsling the rifle with the other.

I smashed clumsily into him, knocking the rifle out of his grasp. It went sliding across the hard snow for a dozen feet. We both lost our balance and went tumbling, locked together. Gower's face was above mine, his eyes streaming and his features all one anguish-contorted grimace.

Blind as he was, he was still almost too much for me. He tried to get the long-bladed hunting knife out of his belt sheath, but I caught his right arm and strained it away. His snowshoes had flapped off. We rolled over and over, getting as white-caked as two snowmen.

My own racked legs seemed to have spikes driven into my shins. The cramp spurred that final spurt of strength that made me wham him in the face and leave him stunned long enough for me to roll over to where the rifle lay. I snatched it up. Gower was starting to worm around, groping.

"Stay put, Major!" I wheezed. The cold, sharp air stabbed into my toiling lungs. "I've got the rifle! I'll shoot you if I have to! It'll be a pleasure!"

He sat there, trying to bathe the pepper out of his burning eyes with handfuls of snow. I crept behind him, trembling and weak as a newborn kitten.

"Get up!" I rasped. My voice sounded rusty. "Your damned eyes'll be all right! We're going back to camp!"

Back in camp I kept him tied up in

knots that nobody could get out of. I was distrustful of every move he made. We had over a week to wait for Quenemo and that was plenty of time for me to get the story out of Gower.

He'd wanted to kill me because of the silver mine shares. The shares had been in his keeping. "Yeah," he admitted grudgingly, "I squandered practically all of them. If I'd waited another six months, when I'd have to hand them over to you, you'd have found out what a crook I was. If you were dead, the stock would've reverted to me. I'd've been able to take care of it then."

I eyed his sullen face over the fire. His hands were laced behind his back.

"What made you do it?" I said. "I mean, what made you sell out in the first place?"

He didn't answer.

I said, "I can guess. Cold cards, slow horses, and fast women."

"That's as good a reason as any, ain't it?" he sneered.

Staying in that camp with Gower was nerve-grinding. When old, wrinkled, ugly Quenemo finally came up the trail with the pack horses to take us home, he had the most welcome face I'd ever seen.

The Way of a Gunhawk

By Al Storm

It looked like a cold trail in Hottah when Chip Santeen tried to flush his quarry into the open. But things got warmer for the famous lawman after he found that hot-lead hideout.

THE Stockman's *Gazette* he had picked up at the station in Denver. Now days old, it had ceased to be news two hundred miles back. But Chip Santeen perused each thrice-read column with indolent complacency. He was at rest, filling the blank spaces of travel with a studied deliberate unwinding of the tensions that

had so recently driven him and would so quickly take him in hand again.

A composed, tightly knit man, Chip Santeen, for long years inured to the vituperative epithets of "Railroad Dick" and "Bounty Hunter" and "Killer" that still followed him. Tall he was, lean and sparse fleshed. His booted heels rode the opposite seat. A cigar was ensconced in the edge of his wide thin mouth. He swayed to the jerk and lurch of the railroad coach, even poised, balanced, giving no thought to Hottah, Idaho, the next stop. Bentwourth might well be a thousand miles away.

Night had come down so that the car was cold with the high thin mountain air. Despite the three lighted lamps swaying over the aisle, the coach was shifting with shadow. Gradually he became aware of the scrutiny fixed upon him, the covert incessant play of eyes from the far end of the car.

Turning the paper, Santeen flicked his glance across the empty seats to see three men, two facing him, the third with his back turned. He didn't recognize any of them, hadn't when they first boarded the train at Soda Springs; and he wondered briefly if he himself had been recognized. It was quite possible. A lot of notoriety had followed his killing of Flick Williams. He shifted slightly, loosening the Whitneyville in his waistband.

The beefy, red-faced man on the aisle glanced up and Santeen met his eye. The man turned hurriedly to glance toward the smoke-wreathed window. Santeen resumed reading. But a tingling traced the nerves of his forearms. He touched a match to his dead cigar.

WHEN the locomotive whistle wailed twice, long-drawn haunted torments of sound, he knew that Hottah was just ahead. He put his feet down, shoving the cloth carpetbag into the clear. If they meant to brace him, it would be soon. Or would they wait until he had turned his back to descend to the Hottah station platform?

The train began braking with jerking, bucking motions that shook the car. Santeen folded the paper with loud rustling. The beefy man looked toward him, saw that Santeen was on his feet, staring bluntly, and turned hurriedly toward the window again. The train strained to a dead stop with a seeming sigh of released pressures, and still Chip Santeen stood and the three sat unmoving, faces carefully averted.

Catching up his bag with his free left hand, Santeen backed the six feet to the car door. He found the catch behind him and swung the door open and stepped back.

Cold wind shocked him with its bitter edge. Smoke was a raw thick tint in the air. The train bucked with a metallic clanging of coupling links and began thrusting ahead. Santeen stepped down to the darkened platform. Faint light showed in the depot. Other light twisted a wide line along the canyon floor and marked Hottah. The train whistle wailed.

He crouched low, there beside the roadbed, so as to be below the window level of the coach. He was watching those windows when the six-gun smashed against the train noise. The bag jerked in his fingers. Santeen whirled away, moving instinctively as he bowed low and plucked the Whitneyville from his waistband.

Sharp ripping muzzle-blast stabbed from the darkened corner of the depot, and he shot back, leaping aside to fire again. The light in the depot blacked out. Then the train was gone from behind him, and he heard the crunch of shale rock under boots on the far side of the track.

He waited, warily, unmoving, until there was no further sound. Slowly Santeen straightened. He reloaded the Whitneyville and strode toward the depot, gun naked in his fist.

A damned fool thing, his lighted cigar, he reflected wryly. Men had died for lesser thoughtlessness.

He angled across the platform, but the lights from Hottah proper limned nothing along the edge of the building. Gone, he figured. But the assistant would be trying again. And again. Until luck soured for one of them and a man died for the trying.

Reaching the depot, he sidled along until he found the door, easing it open and stepping quickly inside. He was standing in the corner when the aged agent finally struck a light.

The old man eyed him and scowled, but said nothing. Santeen put away his gun.

"You're Santeen," the agent said then. "Had a telegram to Sheriff Morton sayin' you was comin'. Reckon others knowed it too."

Santeen smiled fleetingly. "The reception committee was here," he admitted.

THE agent fumbled with his telegrapher's key, finally picked up a blackened cob pipe and loaded it with rough-cut tobacco.

"Bentwourth or Hodges?" he asked bluntly.

"Bentwourth."

"And Hodges?"

"Dead," Santeen said.

The agent jerked. "I heard about you cornering Flick Williams in Negras. But—"

"It was quiet," Santeen said dryly. "Hodges was slow in drawing and hasty in shooting. It didn't make a good story for the papers. Flick Williams was holed up; it took longer to get to him."

This dry recital of manhunting and extermination shook the depot agent. His fingers trembled as he lighted his pipe. Yet he was reluctant to let the subject drop.

"You think Bentwourth's in Hottah?"

Santeen shrugged. He didn't know where Jim Bentwourth was, and to himself he admitted it freely. Bentwourth had been a lesser member of the Oklahoma gang that had dynamited the K. C. Special off the tracks and made off with a fortune in raw bullion. A green stripling, enticed by the glamour of adventure, a novice entrusted only with holding spare horses for the getaway ride.

Flick Williams had been the brains of the gang, Flick Williams and Ace Hodges and the two Nortons. Both of the Nortons were now cursing out the first year of their twenty-year sentence.

Bentwourth hadn't mattered while the bigger game roamed free. But now only Jim Bentwourth remained.

A telegram had reached Chip Santeen in Twin Waters, Oklahoma. "July 27, 1877" was what it had said, only that and "Hottah, Idaho." But its meaning had rung a bell in Chip Santeen's mind. Hardly a coincidence that the date corresponded to the holdup date of the K. C. Special. Somebody had read of the Flick Williams fight and had known that Santeen was still on the case.

So to Hottah.

"Maybe he's around here somewhere," the agent admitted slowly. "Hottah's rough and raw. Lots of things going on that a man'd be wise not to pry into too much. Maybe Jim Bentwourth's prowlin' these parts. I don't know."

"Who sent the wire to the sheriff telling I was coming here?"

The agent fumbled through a sheaf of papers, finally came up with a copy. "Carlos Valorez. He says for Morton to give you every assistance."

"And who is Carlos Valorez?"

The agent looked startled. "Why, don't you know? It's sent from Sheffield."

Santeen didn't know, and he doubted that anyone did. But he merely nodded and held his own counsel. The message was patently a tip-off, probably had set the ambuscade that had greeted him. Sheriff Morton would think nothing of the message. Nor would anyone else who might happen to see it. But somewhere along the line, the true intent of the warning had been heeded. Hottah knew that

Chip Santeen was on his way. Guns had been ready.

HOTTAH was indeed rough and raw. Santeen strode the plank walks and saw that the town was teeming with humanity — miners, cowmen, a few soldiers, and no one could tell what category claimed the remainder. Light gushed from saloons and gambling houses set shoulder to shoulder. Mechanical pianos threw their tunes from swinging doorways. Men talked, shouted, laughed. But oddly there were no saloon barkers.

Only by asking could Santeen find the hotel. The Hottah House was set a block over from the main stem.

"Makes it a little quieter," the clerk said apologetically as Santeen engaged a room. "Then, too, it saves window glass. Bullets, you know."

Chip Santeen nodded as he signed the register. The clerk read as he wrote, then arched his brows in open surprise.

"You that railroad dick? The one that killed—"

"Same name," Santeen said easily. "Get blamed for a lot of things I didn't do. Where might I find Sheriff Morton?"

The clerk's eyes remained widened as he directed Santeen to another off-street. Santeen left his bag. The clerk hovered about him with mute awe, patently eager to go spread the news, yet afraid of missing something should he leave. He followed Santeen to the door, repeating his directions.

The sheriff was middle-aged, chunky, a solid square boulder of a man. He shook hands with Santeen and offered him a cigar.

"Harrigan gang?" the sheriff queried bluntly.

Santeen shook his head. "Jim Bentwourth."

Sheriff Morton glanced sharply at Santeen before blowing a gust of smoke toward the lamp on his desk.

"Didn't know Bentwourth was around here," the lawman said slowly. "Maybe—"

"No rush," Santeen said. "The trail has been cold for two years. Another day won't matter much one way or the other." On sudden impulse he asked the sheriff, "Know a beefy, red-faced hombre—yellow hair, blue eyes, built like a beer keg?"

Again that sharp questioning look from the local lawman. "Sounds like Colt Feever. Talk says he's a Harrigan gunny. Can't prove nothin' either way." When Santeen said nothing, the sheriff leaned forward. "If it's that Harrigan bunch, I'd like to be in on it. I owe that gang plenty. I—"

Santeen got to his feet. "Maybe we'll tangle with them someday," he said. "But right now I'm just smelling around a cold trail." He thought of Colt Feever and his two cronies on the railroad coach, the ambuscade that had barely missed there at the station. "Course, if they insist on trouble—"

Sheriff Morton laughed shortly. He got to his feet. "Nose around. Pick up what you can. You'll learn that there's no outlaw ties on this law office. I do what I can and I'll keep doing it till I get them or they get me. When you're satisfied you can trust me, come back. I want to be in on the kill."

"How's the town marshal?"

"Square," Sheriff Morton said. "No gunslick, but he makes up with guts what he lacks in speed. He'll do."

"Tell him to keep his eye peeled. Somebody tried for me when I got off the train tonight. Maybe that Harrigan gang you're talking about—maybe Jim Bentwourth, or maybe they're together."

INTEREST sharpened in the sheriff's eyes. He scowled and swore softly. He wanted to side the famed railroad dick, but he wouldn't ask again. Santeen read his feelings and he nodded.

"See you around, sheriff."

Sheriff Morton shook hands with him again, and then the raw cold night of Hottah, Idaho, was wrapped

around the Oklahoman. He stood for a moment savoring the noises that drifted from the main street. A wild town, untamed, lusty, but not yet vicious with corruption or organized lawlessness. A healthy, growing town.

Again on the main street, Santeen slowed his pace and drifted, watching, listening, taking in the pace and tempo of the street. He paused to relight the cigar Sheriff Morton had given him. Then he drifted on, crossing the street.

So did the other man.

Santeen's breathing was slow and even despite the tight coil of expectation that gripped his chest. There—He stopped abruptly, hand half lifting, then slowly resumed his pacing. The wide doors of the Golden Palace Bar invited. He passed, stepped around a knot of talking men, then wheeled.

"Evenin', Feever," he said quietly.

The barrel-chested Colt Feever whirled. His beefy red face drained of color. He stood frozen, one thick hand clawed.

Santeen watched him narrowly, without change of expression. Seconds piled up. The knot of men fell silent, held motionless as they became aware of Feever's rigid stance.

"Go inside and have a drink, Feever," Santeen said gently. "Your scalp ain't in my book tonight. Not unless you keep crowdin'."

The beefy gunman licked his lips. He wanted to get away, wanted desperately to back down. His eyes showed it plain. But his pride . . .

Santeen took a step backward. Feever didn't move. Santeen took another step back. A third put him into the shadows. The doors to the Golden Palace fanned open, gushing light, then slammed closed. Colt Feever was gone.

Santeen crossed the street and entered a Chinese restaurant. Two men were eating at the counter. He took a corner table, changing his chair so that he could watch the door.

Word would already be steeping the lawless of the town: Chip Santeen was in Hottah. A new pressure would be applied. Outlaws would cut and run or stand their ground with nervous edginess. Bentwourth, if near Hottah, would learn. And whoever had sent the telegram would send another tip. Or was the telegram just bait that had already drawn him into the trap? . . .

The girl was tall and slender, severely dressed so that the lush bloom of her beauty came as a surprise. She stopped momentarily in the doorway, then came directly to Chip Santeen's table. Santeen started to rise and she leaned toward him, her voice low, barely audible.

"Mr. Santeen? The—the—"

"Bounty hunter?" Santeen finished for her.

BUT his grisly humor failed to thaw the anxiety that shaded her eyes. She seated herself on the lip of a chair, poised, almost as though ready to leap and run. Santeen resumed eating, knowing that in good time she would find the words she wanted.

"I—" the woman began haltingly. "I—it's Jim Bentwourth you're after now, isn't it?" She leaned forward, her eyes suddenly alight with feverish intensity. "He's next, isn't he? You've come to kill him!"

Santeen stirred his coffee with a deliberate casualness. The break? Had his presence already started things moving? Had the weight of his reputation created new pressures, new reactions?

"I never kill a man except in self-defense," he said carefully. "If a man wants to surrender—"

The woman reached out and stopped his slow stirring of the coffee.

"I'm Felice Marsh," she said. "My father is Grover Marsh, president of the Hottah Valley Bank. I'm no cheap baggage or no easily influenced teen-age girl. I'm twenty-six. I know my way around."

"So?"

"I want to marry Jim Bentwourth. I don't want you after him. Whatever reward money you might collect, I will gladly pay."

Santeen frowned. Then Jim Bentwourth was in Hottah! He felt no elation at the news. He studied the woman, finding a dozen indications that she had not lied. She was neither baggage nor blindly infatuated with Jim Bentwourth. Knowing who and what he was, with deliberation, she was willing to merge her life with his. And pay a bribe for the chance.

The words were harsh. Santeen tried to soften them with a smile. "I admire your loyalty, Miss Marsh. But Bentwourth broke the law. He—"

"Law!" Felice Marsh cried. "He broke the law once! But he has repented that mistake a thousand times over! He's honest now; he was honest enough to tell me that he is a wanted man. You think he finds it easy to work for a salary when Butch Harrigan keeps after—" She stopped suddenly.

Santeen sat regarding her with sharp interest. "Go on, Miss Marsh. What is it Butch Harrigan wants?"

For a moment he feared that she would not talk. Then she said, "That —that gold bullion they got from that train, it's still cached. Jim knows where. He wants no part of it; he's told me so. But Butch Harrigan keeps threatening him, trying to get Jim to tell where it's hidden.

"Now he's trying to get Jim fired so that he'll have no way of making a living and will have to turn outlaw. There's a place for Jim in the Harrigan gang; Butch Harrigan has promised him that. But Jim—"

Santeen but half heard. Bentwourth was in Hottah, working for salary. That much he knew. Not yet connected with the Harrigan bunch . . . or was Felice Marsh a victim of Bentwourth's smooth duplicity?

"What do you want me to do?" Santeen asked.

"Go away! Tonight! If you stay—Jim will get frightened and run for it. That means Harrigan's gang. Or if anything happens to you now, Jim will be blamed and—"

"Where is he?"

But that Felice Marsh would not tell. For a long moment she sat studying Chip Santeen's face. Then she rose. Her voice was quiet, resigned, heavy with sorrow.

"Good evening, Mr. Santeen." Then her voice flattened with hatred. "Even—even if he kills you, I'll marry him!" She whirled away, her head bowed.

SANTEEN drank his coffee slowly. The woman had revealed much to him, had thrown pattern of shadow that Santeen could make out. Harrigan might have been daring enough to bring in Santeen in hopes that the dreaded manhunter would frighten Jim Bentwourth into his, Harrigan's, camp.

But Harrigan would never allow Bentwourth to be arrested or killed. Not with Bentwourth the only man alive free to go to the bullion cache. No. Harrigan's scheme would be to kill Santeen and let Bentwourth get saddled with the blame. Felice Marsh had touched it. Flushed from hiding, and blamed for murder, Bentwourth would have no recourse but a return to the owlhoot. Santeen frowned absently and traced a design on the tablecloth with the handle of his spoon.

Two men came in. Both saw him and he saw by their eyes that they had been aware of his presence in town. Hottah knew that the famed, deadly Santeen was on the trail and that that trail had brought him to Hottah.

He rose suddenly, loosening the Whitneyville in his waistband. The move was not hidden. Both men saw it and exchanged meaningful glances. Neither spoke, and after studying them covertly, Santeen saw that he need fear neither of them. Neither was a paid killer.

But the streets were another thing. And the saloons. And who knew Harrigan's men? Santeen walked with a high-strung vigilance, measuring each man before he turned his back to him, searching each doorway and darkened slot between the buildings. Always it was thus at some phase of the game: the hunter hunted.

His presence ran its unseen forces ahead of him. Saloons grew quiet when he pushed through the doors. Men watched his every move, weighing reputation against reality. It was the way he wanted it. Jim Bentwourth's trail had long been cold. Jim Bentwourth had had time to establish himself and to become seated and unsuspected. Only by precipitant flight, or fight, would he make his presence readily detectable. And this, too, ran its strange oneness of pattern.

He was being watched. Sharp-honed weariness come of patient experience warned him, but a dozen subtle little traps caught nothing. On the corner Santeen paused, and it was then that he noticed the unpretentious general store next to the side-street alley. He approach it casually, feeling hunger for a cigar.

Two ranchers were getting their grocery needs. A woman was being waited upon by a comely woman clerk. Felice Marsh stood with her back to the door.

She turned as Chip Santeen stepped in, and her face blanched until her eyes were coals of anguish against her ashen skin.

"You—" she faltered.

Santeen nodded. He started to speak, stopped. The grocery clerk had caught his attention. Smooth shaven, young, with sunken bony jaws and lips tightened by some secret sorrow. But the cant of the head, the thrust of the neck—too long had Chip Santeen studied daguerreotypes of Jim Bentwourth to be mistaken. Santeen felt his pulse slow with recognition. Felice Marsh was staring at him.

"CIGAR, please," Santeen said when Bentwourth had finished with the ranchers and turned to him. "Virginia Belle. Five of them."

Bentwourth nodded and extended the box.

"Amos," Felice Marsh said suddenly, "this is Mr. Santeen, the famous manhunter. Mr. Santeen, meet Amos Kendalson."

Bentwourth — Amos Kendalson — stiffened. His sunken jaws locked tight. He extended his hand. Chip Santeen murmured, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Kendalson."

Felice Marsh had backed away. Santeen lighted a cigar and blew a soft gout toward the ceiling.

"You are new to Hottah, Mr. Kendalson?"

"Two years come next March." The answer was flat, without life or defiance.

Santeen smiled pleasantly. "Too cold for me. I'm from Oklahoma. Anxious to get back."

Bentwourth didn't answer. Santeen frowned reflectively at the glow of his cigar.

"I'd like to talk with you in private, Mr. Kendalson. Would you please come with me?"

Bentwourth's face grew even paler. Felice Marsh gave a low moan that brought the woman clerk hurrying toward them.

"What is it, Amos?" she asked.

But Bentwourth was nodding numbly. Under Chip Santeen's watchful eye he got his coat and the two of them headed out. . . .

Sheriff Morton sat bolt upright behind his worn spur-carved desk when Santeen ushered Bentwourth into the jail office.

"Amos, you—" the sheriff started.

"A trap, sheriff," Santeen cut in. "Mr. Kendalson has kindly agreed to be the bait. Lock him up. Don't let anyone get to him. Understand? We're pretending that I've got Jim Bentwourth."

The sheriff scowled. "I'd like to

know what's going on, Santeen. After all, I'm sheriff here and—"

"Later," Santeen said brusquely. "Now, lock him up, please."

Reluctantly Sheriff Morton led Bentwourth toward the three steel-faced cells and locked him in. Santeen peered out the door. Whoever had been following him had seen him enter the store, leave with Amos Bentwourth Kendalson. Would it mean anything?

The sheriff was in an ugly mood when he returned.

"You've put this town on its ear just by you bein' here," he said bluntly. "Ed Carroll stuck on an extra gun to make his rounds tonight. He says everybody is fidgety as a bronc in a forest fire."

Santeen closed the outer door. He was shivering against the Idaho cold.

"Who's Butch Harrigan?" he asked.

Sheriff Morton swore heatedly, then subsided and began reciting a long list of nefarious activities which did not exclude a few assorted murders.

"Robbed Grover Marsh's bank, you say?" Santeen cut in. "How's Marsh and his daughter get along?"

The sheriff paused, eyeing Santeen. "She's his only child and he's got money. She's never wanted for a thing she didn't get."

Santeen nodded. "How's Marsh like Amos Kendalson?"

"Fine. And Mrs. Kendalson, too."

"Mrs. Kendalson?"

"Sure. They both work in Ike Presnell's store." The sheriff scowled. "Wait a minute. Now don't tell me—"

But Santeen had withdrawn behind a screen of deep quick thinking. Kendalson married! And Felice Marsh wanting to marry him! And knowing he already had a wife! Was the wife a pose or was it Felice Marsh who was ready to ignore—

"You're sure Kendalson's married?" he probed.

The sheriff flushed. "Damn it, Santeen. I never asked no preacher, but—"

"I'll be at the hotel," Santeen cut him off. "If anybody comes asking about Amos Kendalson, I want to know it."

AGAIN it was the night, and the cold, and a gnawing torment of uncertainty. Would Felice Marsh send Jim Bentwourth onto the owl-hoot just to get him away from his wife? It didn't sound reasonable. No. Whoever had sent for Santeen wasn't figuring on getting Bentwourth arrested. They were more than likely figuring on scaring him half to death by graphically reminding him that Chip Santeen was on his trail.

All of Hottah knew it now. And if Santeen were to be found dead, who would be blamed but the mysterious Jim Bentwourth? Which would profit? Not Felice Marsh, nor Mrs. Kendalson. Santeen swore. Always the unknown Butch Harrigan loomed ominously behind his carefully reasoned scheme of probabilities.

Santeen headed for the little side-street store for a talk with Mrs. Kendalson, but he found the store darkened, the door locked. The hour was late. A good bit of the main street riotousness had quieted though a full half of the saloons still slung their gaiety and lights against the night.

Santeen crossed toward his hotel and went up to his room with somber thoughtfulness. He was marked for death. It was the only answer. Maybe he was being a fool. Maybe, now that he had Bentwourth, he should clap the irons and break it off sharp and clean. But he disliked being made a tool for any man's designs, and someone had purposely set him after Bentwourth.

Seated in a corner with the lamp turned low and the blinds carefully pulled, he waited the next move. Minutes ticked away, but he was not sleepy.

The knock was light, hurried, as though the visitor wanted as little attention as possible.

Santeen said, "Come in. The door isn't locked."

It was the woman clerk who had been working with Bentwourth in the store, the one Sheriff Morton had identified as Mrs. Amos Kendalson. Santeen masked his surprise. He lowered the Whitneyville which had been covering the door.

"You're after Jim," she said. "I know it. Felice told me who you were. You're after him and now you've got him and you'll kill him if anyone makes a move to stop you from taking him away."

Santeen didn't answer.

The woman came closer. She was as young as Felice Marsh, and fully as pretty, he saw. She looked up at Santeen appealingly.

"Please," she said huskily, "give him a chance. Felice told me you weren't interested in money. But you're—you—" The woman faltered, her color rising with her agitated breathing. "Would—couldn't anything persuade you to—to leave him alone?"

She was within reach, soft, yielding. Santeen scowled. The woman placed a small hand on his arm.

"Please," she whispered. "He's all I have left, and—"

"And if I say no?" Santeen queried.

"Please. Colt Feever knows he's in jail. If I could just warn Jim, if I could tell him—"

"You can tell him I intend leaving on the train tomorrow night," Santeen said. "All the railroad wants is recovery of the lost bullion. As for me—"

THE woman smiled, then her face slowly set and drained of color. The smile remained a false grimace. Santeen reached out and took her hand.

"And no bargain, Miss Bessie Bentwourth. I don't trade that way." He stopped her surprise with an uplifted hand. "I've studied enough family pictures of Jim Bentwourth to know most of the family. It took a while, but I finally placed you. But why as his wife?"

"He's playing straight, staying at home and out of trouble. People expect that of a married man. But a single man they expect to see out kicking around and raising Ned. They'd wonder about Jim if he was single and stuck off by himself so much."

The woman's smile came back. A certain coy shyness brought a blush to her features.

"Go along now and stop tempting me," Santeen said.

He escorted the woman to the door. Long after she had gone he stood staring into space. As though he himself posed the only threat to Jim Bentwourth's security! Butch Harrigan was always there, and other lawmen.

Santeen got his hat and strode out into the hallway, moving fast with the decision corrosive within him. He'd free Bentwourth in return for location of the bullion cache. He could report Jim Bentwourth dead, the case closed. Then let Harrigan do his damndest.

The jail office was dimly lighted. The rest of the town was in darkness. Santeen was almost upon them before he noticed the glint of cold moonlight on a horse's steel bit ring. He stopped. Five—six horses, he made out. And a man, crouched and holding the reins, watching him. A gun was in the man's hand.

Cursing softly, Santeen raised his hands shoulder high. He approached the horse holder, sensing the man's reluctance to fire. A shot now would waken the town. At the last moment Santeen jumped, waving his arms. The horse snorted and tried to jerk away. The horse holder was yanked off balance. Before he could recover, Santeen had knocked him rolling with his fist. The man came up on the far side of the horses. Santeen leaped toward the shadows away from the man.

The horse guard called out. A figure appeared in the jail office door. Colt Feever.

"Feller jumped me—ducked behind the jail," the horse guard said. "Should I—"

"Hold your fire," Feever snapped. "Butch is gettin' the keys off'n old Morton. We'll be singin' a sweet song with a saddlebag full of gold afore long. But keep your eye peeled."

Crouched flat against the jail wall, Santeen heard the outlaw. He scuttled toward the rear of the building, circled its blind side, and came up on the far side. Here a small window gave him a glimpse of the office interior. Sheriff Morton and a paunchy, droop-mustached man stood with arms raised. Facing them stood two men with guns drawn. A third man was turning toward the row of cells.

Raising his voice in a wild crazy yell, Santeen shoved his face close to the glass. Eyes flicked involuntarily toward him. Then, before the outlaws could shoot, he smashed out the window glass and shot out the lamp. Darkness dropped thick within the office.

The sheriff and the town marshal were on their own inside. A man yelled hoarsely. A gun fired twice, fast. From the street, Santeen heard the horse guard's excited voice. He slid toward the front of the jail office. The guard had mounted but was holding his ground, not running. The building seemed fairly to rock with concussion as a burst of firing set off.

SANTEEN saw a faint flare of light far up the street. Hottah was coming alive. The horse guard saw it too, and he called out.

A figure came scooting from the darkened building on hands and knees. He got to his feet and Santeen recognized the paunch belly of the town marshal. The horse guard raised his revolver. Santeen blasted him from the saddle with a quick shot.

"Grab his gun if they took yours," Santeen yelled to the befuddled town marshal. "We got them cooped up in there. Give 'em hell when they try getting out."

The marshal grabbed up the horse guard's fallen gun. He paused long enough to chase the outlaws' horses up the street. A gun flash poked at him from the jail office doorway and he shot back twice, shooting waist high.

Other lights were springing up. Far down the street a man yelled.

"Harrigan's gang is bustin' the jail!" Santeen yowled at the top of his voice. "Come a-runnin'! Fetch your guns!"

That yell brought the Harrigan bunch boiling from the jail office. It was quick, sharp-heated, deadly. And ended in half a dozen seconds.

Santeen stood in the shadow poking fresh loads into his smoking Whitneyville.

"We got 'em," the town marshal said. "But I ain't heard a peep outa Morton. You suppose them skunks—"

Santeen moved around to the broken window. He lighted a match and tossed it inside. In that brief wink of time, his eye caught the emptiness of the office. But Sheriff Morton was limp behind the desk. Then the match went out.

A tall, bearded Hottah citizen brought a lantern. Santeen went inside the jail office. A quick examination showed Sheriff Morton living. A bluish lump was raised above his right eye. The cell keys lay on the floor where the outlaws had discarded them. Santeen unlocked the cell and released a dazed, wondering Jim Bentwourth. Sheriff Morton was revived.

Someone had brought the outlaws inside, ranged them along the floor. Santeen stood looking down at his and the town marshal's handiwork. He nodded soberly.

Turning to Bentwourth, he said, "Looks like Jim Bentwourth finally got it, don't it, Kendalson?"

Bentwourth nodded mutely.

"Yes," Santeen said. "That's the end of outlaw Jim Bentwourth. And most of the Harrigan gang too, I guess."

Sheriff Morton swore bitterly. "And me knocked galley-west so's I miss all the fun. Damn it all, Santeen. I was hittin' the floor to get out of your way and I dove plumb into the corner of that blasted desk." Sheriff Morton fetched the desk a resounding kick.

Santeen turned away, stopped. Bessie Bentwourth stood before him. A strange coy shyness misted her eyes.

"Please," she whispered. "At least let me tell you thanks. And—" Her fingers touched his arm.

"I'll be dining alone this evening," Santeen said. "You might join me, Mrs. Kendalson. That is if you can get away from your husband."

Her laughter assured him, that would be easy.

Saddle Savvy

By Neil Carson

MOST any kind of Western kack
Will suit the cowpoke well,
Just so it fits the hoss's back
Fer rigin' hard as hell.

Some riders like 'em single fire,
Some want a double rig,
Some figger that they most admire
The saddle that is big.

Some like 'em with a Texas skirt,
Some want the skirts full-round,
Some like 'em dark as 'dobe dirt
From Arizona ground.

Most any kind of saddle goes
For range, and ranch, and West
Save one that every waddy knows
And hates with earnest zest.

This thing he calls a postage stamp,
A kidney pad or pancake,
He wouldn't wish it on a tramp—
It makes his backbone ache.

It's tiny as a runty mule,
A-starvin' fer his food,
It's built to suit the Eastern fool—
This saddle of the dude.

Pioneer Sawbones

By
Nat McKelvey

The stormy career of a Western medico who was as adept with a six-gun as with a scalpel.

SOMETIME in 1886, a tall, muscular, broad-shouldered American faced Geronimo, the notorious Apache chief, and made a curious bet.

"I'll wager," said the mustached white man, "twenty dollars to five that you can't stand ten feet away from me and shoot three arrows into a tree without my hearing the bowstring twang."

"Can do," Geronimo countered, his slash mouth curling in an arc of contempt. "You give money now. This too easy."

According to Geronimo's stipulation, the American turned his back and closed his eyes while the old Indian carefully fitted a war-arrow to his bow. Two or three minutes ticked off, and the white man became impatient.

"When are you going to start?" he inquired. "Or have you changed your mind?"

"Turn. Open eyes," the Indian grunted. "You see."

The big man wheeled. From a tree ten feet away sprouted three arrows in a space no bigger than a Mexican dollar.

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed the white man, paying Geronimo twenty dollars. "I didn't hear a sound!"

The man who lost this strange bet was Dr. George Emery Goodfellow, frontier surgeon, famed as an expert on gunshot wounds and well known to medical history for his skill in operating.

The occasion of his meeting with Geronimo was the recapture of that wily chieftain who had escaped from United States military custody. Many a time Doc Goodfellow had attended a dying sentry, shot with an arrow from very close ambush. To the doctor's inquiring mind it seemed queer that none of these sentries could recall hearing the slap of the bowstring from a weapon in the hands of an attacker so close. The test with Geronimo proved why.

Many strange things happened to the fabulous Goodfellow as he pursued his destiny in such dangerous frontier posts as Fort Whipple, Fort Lowell, Tucson, and Tombstone, Arizona. His stormy career included expulsion from Annapolis Naval Academy, distinguished service in the Spanish-American War, decoration by the Mexican government, and renown for his rustic wit as guiding hand behind innumerable verdicts of pioneer coroner's juries in a day when death by violence was the rule.

Following "assessment" work on one McIntire, who ran afoul of a superior gunman, Doc Goodfellow declared:

"This body is rich in lead, but too badly punctured to hold whisky."

AFTER the John Heith lynching in Tombstone in February, 1884, Goodfellow wrote a Puckish verdict which stated that Heith had died of emphysema. Asked to define the disease, the doctor said:

"The cellular tissues of the body fill with air, caused by effects of high altitude, failure, for instance, to keep the feet on the ground."

Heith had been hanged from the highest telephone pole in Tombstone.

Strong as a bull buffalo, Doc Goodfellow viewed the violence of his day through a pair of piercing blue eyes. His receding hairline and high forehead gave him a look of wisdom, enhanced by a bushy mustache that covered his mouth. His straight nose and angular jaw told a story of stubborn strength, completely in accord with his huge, rawboned body.

Doc Goodfellow was, in fact, an athlete, devoted to horse racing, wrestling, and boxing. He liked to bet on these contests and often did so with the reckless grace of a professional gambler.

Once in a buckboard, he dashed twenty-eight miles from Tombstone to the Camou Ranch at the head of the San Pedro River, there to attend the badly ailing Señora Camou. In return for his services, he received three wooden boxes, each heavy with one thousand pesos, a total of $1,500 in American funds.

Such a princely fee might well have sobered most professional men. Not so Doc Goodfellow. Returned to Tombstone, he made the saloon circuit, loudly yelling, "Drinks for the house!" What he did not spend on liquor, he flung away gambling and betting on athletic contests. In one night the $1,500 fee evaporated.

Doc Goodfellow was born in Downieville, Sierra County, California, December 23, 1855, the son of Milton J. Goodfellow, a mining engineer who had migrated to the Golden State in 1849 in a covered wagon.

The father, member of the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, had studied both dentistry and medicine, though he had no degree in either. Yet so skilled was he, that frontier patients called him "doctor" and sent for him whenever their ailing constitutions required superior help.

From his mother's side, too, George Goodfellow inherited a medical tradition. She was Ann Amanda Baskin, daughter of Dr. John Baskin, a Philadelphia physician.

After schooling in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and at the California Military Academy, George Goodfellow, in 1871, entered the University of California as an engineering student. He studied mathematics, French, English, history, and ancient languages,

and his teachers considered him just "average."

In later years, however, he learned to read and speak French, German, and Spanish fluently. His ability in the language of Spain made him a dominant figure in arrangements for surrender of Santiago de Cuba in the Spanish-American War.

WHILE at the University of California, Goodfellow refused an appointment to West Point, but accepted, in 1872, an opportunity to enroll at Annapolis.

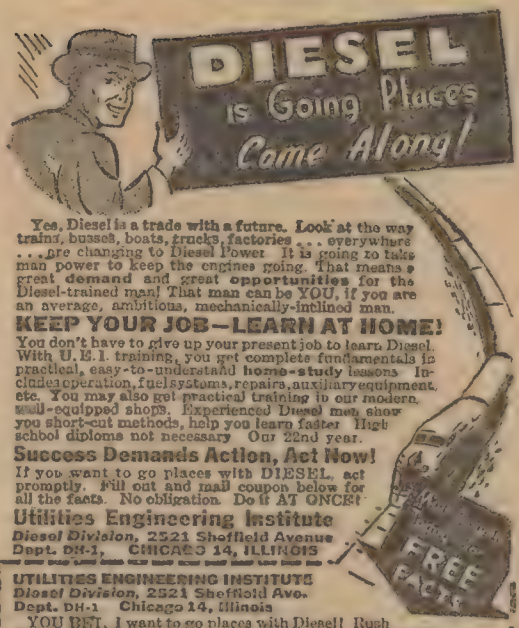
Shortly, the burly young man became boxing champion, a talent that led to his court-martial and expulsion from the Naval Academy. In a personal brawl, not of his making, Goodfellow so badly beat a fellow student as to put the aggressor in the hospital. A court-martial found George guilty of conduct unbecoming a gentleman and future officer, and with a flourish of publicity, opened the exits for him.

Unperturbed, Goodfellow proceeded to Pennsylvania where he read medicine in the office of a cousin, Dr. T. B. Labells. Finally, in 1876, he graduated with honors from Cleveland Medical College at the University of Wooster.

After marriage to Katherine Colt at Meadville, Pennsylvania, Doc Goodfellow practiced for a time in Oakland. City life bored him, however, so he moved to Prescott to become company physician for a mining firm superintended by his father.

Even this rugged community, with its frontier Fort Whipple, could not satiate Goodfellow's thirst for adventure. He applied for service with General Custer, but red tape in Washington held up his appointment, saving George from extinction in the famous "last stand" massacre.

After serving for nearly a year at Fort Lowell, near Tucson, Goodfellow turned up in Tombstone. When he arrived in 1880, the town was a roaring



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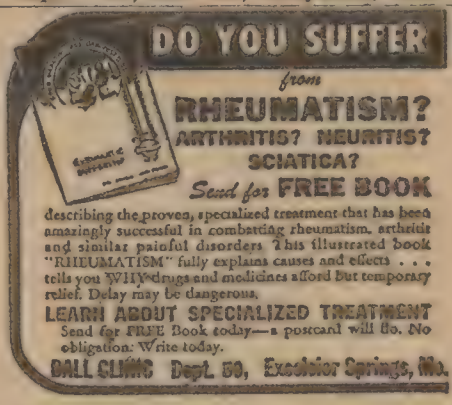

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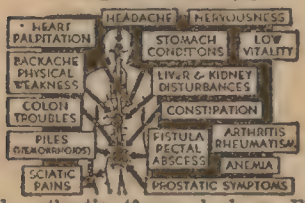

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Bishop Hall, an Episcopal prelate, characterized the times when he said:

"Phoenix is a pleasing place, Tucson is an important town and Tombstone is the condensation of wickedness."

In this "condensation," Doc Goodfellow became a member of the Tombstone Rangers, a rope and tree society for the enforcement of justice. His influence soon became felt in both saloon and high society, and he was accepted without question by both.

Talkative and gregarious, Doc hung out at the Crystal Palace Saloon, where he could be more readily found than in his office. A specialist in gunshot wounds, he won respect of such men as Curly Bill Brocius, noted organizer of the Skeleton Canyon massacres, and a bandit without compunction.

Some of Goodfellow's observations on the medical phenomenon of shock are still classic.

There was the day when Morgan Earp, member of the notorious gunslick clan, was playing a quiet game of pool. Outside, on the Tombstone street, lingered a half-breed, variously known as Freeze or Indian Charlie.

FREEZE bore Morgan no particular ill will, except that, for some unrecorded reason, he wanted to see him dead. Carefully, therefore, he drew a bead on the pool player and let fly a shot through the saloon door. The bullet crashed through Morgan, who died within the hour.

Before it completed its mission, the half-breed's bullet virtually spent, tapped George Berry, an innocent bystander, on the thigh. Promptly, Berry let out a warwhoop and toppled over dead.

Called to investigate, Doc Goodfellow announced his findings. "His injury was inconsequential," reported the doctor. "Technically he died from

shock. The simple fact is the man was scared to death."

Many a gunhawk, on the prowl for some mortal enemy, stipulated, before he took off, that Doc Goodfellow remain within calling distance—just in case things turned out adversely.

Though Goodfellow saved many a worthless skin by surgical skill, he regretted all his life that he could never seem to prolong the life of anyone punctured by a .45 slug through the abdomen.

A gun-toter himself, Doc Goodfellow well knew the lethal power of the Colt revolver. "He was," in the words of a medical historian, "as dextrous with the revolver as with the scalpel. His courage was of the desperate type which knew no fear."

In 1886, while with a band of soldiers chasing Geronimo through Arizona hills, Goodfellow suddenly found himself on a narrow trail, face to face with a huge rattlesnake, coiled to strike.

The doctor could not retreat, nor could he pass the reptile. He dared not shoot for fear of revealing the position of the pursuers to hidden Indians. So he did the only practical thing. He picked the snake up in his bare hands and flung it over the cliff.

Doc Goodfellow's acquaintance with desert reptiles was always first-hand. To prove that the Gila monster, ferocious orange and black beaded desert lizard, is not poisonous, he deliberately allowed himself to be bitten by one.

The result of this desperate experiment he published in 1907 in a letter to the *Scientific American*. "The lizard," he wrote, "is definitely not poisonous. True, if angered, the monster will eject the foul contents of its stomach. But it has no poison glands or hollow teeth. Also, contrary to public opinion, it is not necessary to use a chisel or crowbar to pry open its mouth once it has fastened on a victim."

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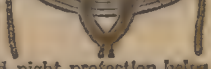

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During his career, Goodfellow performed every operation from cataracts to abdominals, often with only a kitchen table for his surgery.

In the Chandler Ranch fight of March 29, 1882, Doc Goodfellow took professional pride. During the fracas, Deputy Billy Breckenridge and his aides shot and killed Zwing Hunt and Billy Grounds, a pair of ruthless holdup men.

When Goodfellow examined Grounds's body, he was startled to note that though the man took a full charge of buckshot from Breckenridge's gun, not a single pellet had penetrated. The charge struck Grounds in the neck at the exact spot where the desperado wore a silk kerchief. The shot, failing to penetrate the silk, had driven the kerchief into the bandit's flesh.

Goodfellow published his observation on this case in a renowned paper, "Impenetrability of Silk to Bullets."

DURING the great Tombstone fire of 1881, Doc Goodfellow became a pioneer in plastic surgery. Knocked out by a falling beam, one George W. Parsons received a large splinter through the cheek and had his nose plastered all over his face. Goodfellow cut the man's nose loose, rearranged it, and by means of a plaster cast and wire held it in place until healing was completed.

"I emerged," declared Parsons, "with absolutely no disfiguration."

On a grim May day in 1887, the earth around Bavispe, Sonora, Mexico, began to heave and writhe, splitting the land into canyons, swallowing native huts, maiming inhabitants. Goodfellow led a party of scientists to the scene. While they studied misery, he relieved it.

For his lifesaving services, he was cited by the Mexican government, decorated with a double Austrian eagle, once property of Emperor Maximilian, and presented a fine roan horse. More touching, the poor peons offered

any number of themselves as his perpetual slaves.

They dubbed Goodfellow, "El Santo Doctor"—the Doctor Saint, and every year, no matter what the location of their benefactor, they made a pilgrimage to his door. To pay him homage they even turned up in San Francisco.

The gift horse, which surely should not have been looked in the mouth, turned out to be a nag of contention. It seems the roan had been filched from the United States Army, and clearly bore on its left shoulder the brand, "U.S."

The federal government, through a cavalry lieutenant, sued Doc Goodfellow for recovery of the horse or for $150 indemnity. Records of the Arizona Pioneers' Historical Society show that on Nov. 28, 1887, Judge W. H. Barnes ordered the sheriff to seize and retain the mount until further notice.

In the course of his practice, Doc Goodfellow found it expedient to learn to operate railway locomotives. He learned and acquired a license and further fame. When Francis J. Heney put a bullet into Dr. John C. Handy, first chancellor of the University of Arizona, at Tucson, Goodfellow made a famous ride.

From Tombstone, he raced to Fairbanks in a madly careening buckboard. At Fairbanks, he took the throttle of a narrow-gauge locomotive and sent it over its groaning rails at a devil's speed.

At Benson, he boarded a mainliner, shoved aside the engineer, and highballed the engine to Tucson around curves and over grades in a run that is still the talk of railroad men in the Southwest. Unfortunately, all this superhuman recklessness proved of no avail. Dr. Handy cashed in his chips anyway.

During the Spanish-American War, Doc Goodfellow served as "a civilian with no rank or authority" under General William R. Shafter. At Santi-

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ago, however, he proved to be the only man available with a fluent command of Spanish.

Shafter sent him to dicker with General Torral for surrender of the town. Torral's position was far from hopeless, militarily, and he seems to have been talked into surrender by Goodfellow's linguistic ability and charm.

Following the war, Doc Goodfellow retired to San Francisco to practice. But after the great earthquake of 1906, he again heeded the call of the frontier. This time he traveled to Mexico as surgeon-in-chief for the Southern Pacific Railway.

In Mexico, he established a modern hospital which, however, could not save him from a mortal attack of multiple neuritis. After a prolonged illness he died in Los Angeles, in 1910, at the age of fifty-five.

The "Saintly Surgeon," who performed the first appendectomy in Arizona, was also the first physician to use spinal anesthesia and the first to advocate open-air treatment for tuberculosis.

"A surgeon," Doc Goodfellow used to say, "should have the eye of an eagle, the heart of a lion, and the touch of a woman."

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